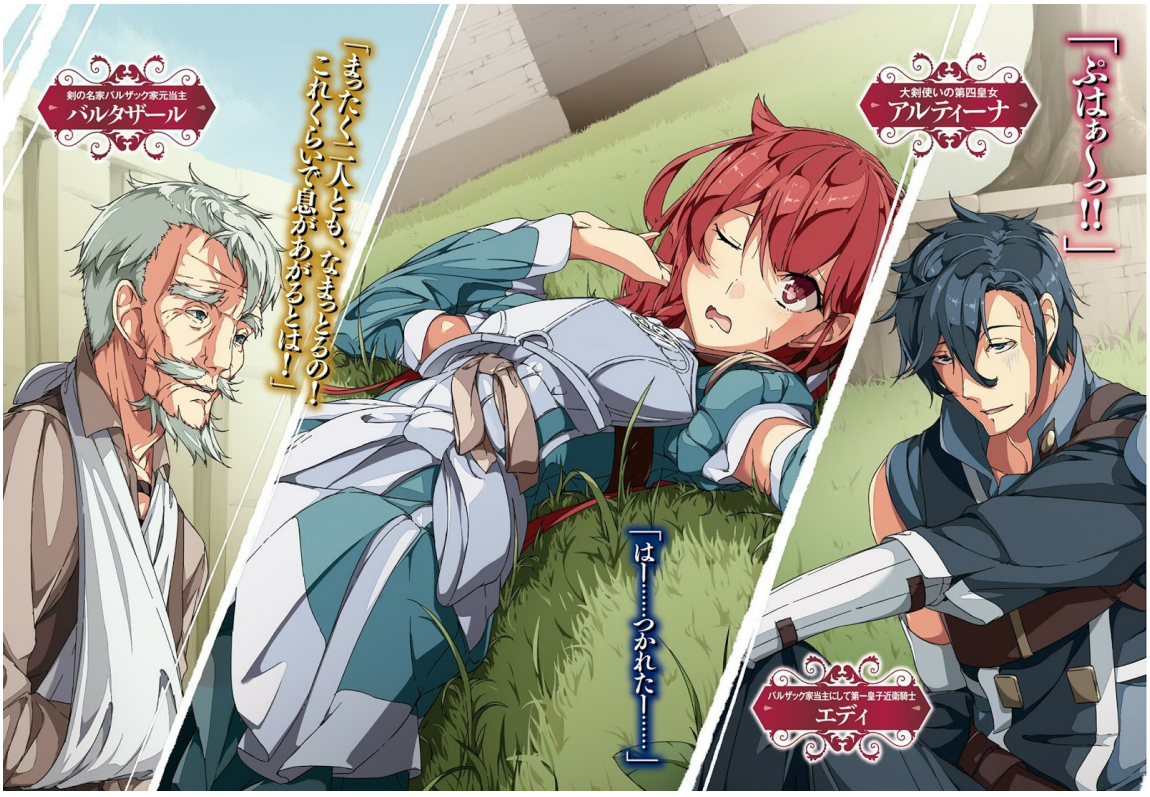
はけんのこうき アルティーナ
ALTINA
the Sword Princess
アルティーナ
覇剣の皇姫
IX
Yukiya Murasaki
むらさきゆきや
ill. himesuz
ファミ通文庫

『吊られた狐』傭兵団の少女
フランツィスカ
継承権争いを嫌う帝国第三皇子
バスティアン
ハイプリタニア王家の正統なる後継者
エリーゼ
「ね、ねえ？　ちょっと、アンタ。
なんで宮殿なんか来たわけ？
観光？　観光なの？」
「ここが
俺の家なんだよ」


剣の名家バルザック家元当主
バルタザール
大剣使いの第四皇女
アルティーナ
「ぷはぁ～っ!!」
「まったく、二人とも、なまっとろの！
これくらいで息があがるとは！」
「はー……つかれたー……」
バルザック家当主にして第一皇子近衛騎士
エディ

With Deepest Respect,

Imperial Year 851 July 1st, clear weather.

Right now, I have been seconded to the Imperial First Army, and stationed at Mauldre City, 50 Li to the north of the capital.

This is a prosperous city with a booming paper and steel manufacturing industry, thanks to the river flowing through it and the direction of the wind. It also has a large vineyard, which is famous for its Mauldre wine.

I think you have probably received the report, I am in the middle of the campaign to retake Grebauvar City that had been seized by the combined forces of High Britannia and the Germanian Federation.

The target city is just one hill away, and the space in front of this hill will become a battlefield.

The First Imperial Army has a force of 20,000; with 3,000 cavalry, 3,000 artillery and 14,000 infantry. The ratio of infantry is slightly higher.
That's because most of them were former soldiers from the Third Army.
In the Bonaire Fort defence battle a few days earlier, the commander of the Third Army, Lieutenant General Buxlow died in the course of duty, and the Sun Knights were decimated. The unit was disbanded as its command structure was lost, and was rostered under the First Army.

Even though the number of cavalry is lacking, it shouldn't affect the campaign too much as we will be attacking a fort.

Another thing is the increase in the number of pioneers. It was on short notice, but we managed to gather a lot of pioneers. This is probably because the population around the capital is dense, and the place is well governed.

I will elaborate on the purpose of the pioneers in the future.

Additionally, the one thing special about the Imperial First Army is the large number of chefs in the unit. Their huge numbers were not documented in any of the records. Their food selection is quite varied. This is because the target isn't far from the capital, so they made these preparations with a siege in mind. I think our unit can learn from this——

"... Hmm… This is becoming a report."

Regis reviewed the letter, then crossed out the words 'With Deepest Respect' with two lines, and added the word 'Report'.

And with this, one of his tasks was done.

The letter Altina wanted was probably not a report made by a subordinate to his superior, but something written with a more intimate and friendly tone.

Then he should write it while keeping in mind how they usually converse.

Greetings,

Altina, how are you doing? I am doing well.

A few days ago, I visited Ms Carol's bookstore and bought a book.

> Although the main character of the book hates studying and school, he is very considerate of others, it is a story of how the friends in the classroom help each other. This is the final volume that is all the rage among the readers, and I am deeply moved after reading it. This series has been ongoing for 8 years, and I started reading it since I was 12.
>
> The most fantastic part is ——

After writing for a while, Regis stopped again.

"... Hmm… This is becoming an idle chat about books. Or rather, a book review."

Regis couldn't stop when the topic was about books.

He shouldn't write like this.

If he wrote like this without restricting himself, it would eat into his time to perform other tasks. Specifically speaking, he wouldn't have time to read other books.

Now that he thought about it, he had read many letters written by great people in the past.

"... Emperor Vicente wrote letters to ladies before. He was highly regarded as a poet, I will use his letter as reference then."

And so he wrote on another paper.

Ah, my most beloved Altina,

As long as you are well, the world would be filled with hope.

Did you receive my most precious item that was sent with the letter? Can you guess what it is?

It is love.

Regis laid onto the table with his head in his arms.

“… This… is wrong.”

Speaking of which, he couldn’t recall writing any letters to friends.

Although he had written a ton of reports and requisition forms.

“Hmm… No choice but to write again tonight.”
It was time for the conference.
Regis put down his pen and walked out of his assigned room.
When he walked through the corridor of this unfamiliar building, he heard a noise. The heavy infantry guards were saluting to him.

He peeked into the large room which had its doors open, and found an oval shaped table with about a dozen men in there.

The man with blonde hair and crimson eyes sitting at the innermost seat smiled.

He was the commander of the First Imperial Army, the Field Marshal of the entire Imperial forces, and the next Emperor in waiting——Allen Deux Latreille de Belgaria.

“Sir Regis, this way… Let me introduce you to the staff officers again.”
“Ah, thank you…”

Regis was about to sit at the least conspicuous seat when he was called by his name. Latreille was beckoning Regis to sit on his left, corresponding to Germain’s seat on the right.

Latreille stood up and looked at everyone present.

“As everyone already knows… This is Third Grade Admin Officer Regis d’Auric. Just for this one battle, I have seconded him from the Fourth Army, to assist the First Army’s Chief Strategist.”

Even though he was officially a Fifth Grade Admin Officer, he was being treated as if he had been promoted.

The staff officers got up in unison and saluted. Regis felt the pressure from the atmosphere and returned a salute hurriedly.

“… P-Please take care of me.”

Germain who was standing beside Latreille looked his way.

As an adjutant, his responsibilities overlaps with Regis. Their relationship was akin to business competitors.

But Germain's expression was very gentle.

"Fufu… Some of the staff probably think I am very unhappy… And it is natural to think so. But don't worry. I have experienced Sir Regis' careful and farsighted planning personally, and I have never lost that sense of respect. And my lord recruited you because he felt you are well suited for the battle this time… I also think this is a rare opportunity to learn from you. Rest assured that I don't mean any harm. Please ease your guard against me too, Sir Regis."

"Ah, erm… I should be the one learning from you… I will do my best to contribute."

Regis was flattered.

Even though the people around complimented him, the only thing that flashed across his mind was his future of being pushed down a cliff.

But the staff officers of the First Army had no interest in creating such a hostile atmosphere. Some nodded seriously while others seemed relieved…

There were those who stared at Regis too.
They must be feeling conflicted.

—— How scary.

His back was soaked in cold sweat. Regis was born a commoner, and both his age and rank were low. He was also the strategist of the Fourth Princess, not a subordinate of the Second Prince. He

even fought a skirmish that was akin to a civil war with the knights of the First Army in the past, which led to some deaths.

Legally speaking he wasn't to be blamed, but he was still someone who killed their colleagues.

On the other hand, his achievement in the war against High Britannia were acknowledged by everyone, and Latreille was the one who recruited him.

For the members of the First Army, it was a fact that 'this guy isn't welcomed, but we can't criticize him openly'.

Such suppressed negative emotions were more frightening than obvious shows of disgust —— That's what Regis thought.

As expected, I should resign from this mission. Regis lost his nerves.

But he joined after considering all the pros and cons.

He couldn't go back on his words now.

For Altina's sake, Regis had to investigate Latreille, the mysteries surrounding the Emperor's death and his policies from now on.

And also for a personal matter which was hard for him to say —— In order for Regis to return to the Fourth Army that was waiting for him, he needed to pass his Third Grade Admin Officer promotion test. If he failed, what awaited him would be a long period of re-test. By the way, the subject of the test was practical skills.

It was impossible for Regis who couldn't even wield a sword properly to pass the test.

As the Field Marshal of the Empire, Latreille had the authority to use this battle as a replacement for the test.

—— Regis joined the Imperial First Army for this reason. Not only did it give him a chance to investigate the matters related to Latreille, he would be exempted from the promotion test and could return to the Fourth Army if he successfully took back Grebauvar city.

Even though the agreement was simple, Regis felt an uneasiness and pressure as if he was climbing a huge cloud-covered mountain.

Chapter 1 - The Return of the Prince

> The capital of Versailles.

Franziska tilted her head.

—— Do Belgarians lack the sense of feeling tension and terror?

Even though security around the palace was heavy, but the city didn't even have a gate, and she entered disappointingly simply.

Franziska of 'Renard Pendu' left her light armour with her sister, and put the crossbow she was so proud of into a basket covered with a piece of cloth as she walked alone on the streets.

She was wearing a fluttery dress that befit a girl of her age.

Her pendant which was proof that she was a mercenary was hidden inside her dress.

Starting from the south gate of the city, there was a broad stone paved road that led straight into the palace. The side paths were all in a straight line, so it was easy to navigate.

—— *Did they not consider the possibility that they might get invaded by other countries? Are they that confident?*

The residents of this city seemed to be a hundred percent confident that ‘an enemy nation that could reach the capital of Belgaria does not exist’.

That’s why they didn’t build any walls.

Even though Franziska felt uneasy about this, in the centuries since the capital was relocated here, the Belgarian’s confidence had never been proven wrong.

The High Britannia forces advanced was right at the capital’s doorsteps, but they still retreated. This thinking still held true even now.

It was annoying how prosperous the Belgarian Empire was.

Shops lined up both sides of the streets with all sorts of wares on display. The citizens walking pass Franziska were all dressed wonderfully.

Because of the numerous battles and the recent passing of the Emperor, there were some who wore black clothes in mourning… But no matter what, there couldn’t be so many nobles. Which meant that even the commoners could spare the effort to mind their dressing.

There were also soldiers guarding the city.

Their mission wasn’t to defend against enemy nations, but to maintain public order.

It would be bad if someone who recognized Franziska’s face was here, so she covered her eyes with her fringe, and appeared less

conspicuous.

Franziska was born in the northern region of the Germanian Federation. It was a poor nation closed in by constant snow, their primary industry was earning money with mercenaries.

I have never been to High Britannia, but there isn't any country more prosperous than this Empire right?

Why would any nation pick a fight with this country?

Franziska entered an alley and after walking a while, she went into a cafeteria built from red bricks.

After browsing the shop, she saw a young woman with an extraordinary air about her, and a 10 year old girl sitting opposite each other on chairs made from oak.

They were her elder sister Jessica, and younger sister Martina.

Franziska ordered a cup of coffee from a waitress and then headed to the table they were waiting at.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"Sister is back!"

Her younger sister stood up and hugged her.

Franziska endured the power of her pounce.

"Eheehee! Sorry for making you wait, Martina!"

"I don't feel that I am waiting at all!"

Jessica sipped her coffee as she whispered.

“… You are five minutes late.”

“Ugh… I-It can’t be helped okay? It’s not like I went there to play.”

“Sit down first.”

The waitress served her coffee.

After making Martina sit, Franziska sat too.

She placed the basket with a short bow in it at her feet, then took back her leather bag. Her luggage was rather big. She took a sip of coffee first.

Uwah, the fragrance dissipating in my mouth, the joyous bitterness on the tongue and a faint sour taste. There’s also a hint of sweetness?

“It’s really delicious!?”

When Franziska was ordering, she thought the ‘coffee doesn't earn much money, the empire will burn…’ However, luxurious sugar seemed to have been added.

This coffee had turn into another type of beverage.

Like a type of dessert.

Jessica asked quietly:

“… Well? Any results?”

“Hmmp, isn’t that a given? There are plenty of Belgarian Officers in this city who lust after my beauty in no time. They then spilled the beans easily.”

Jessica crossed her legs the other way, and looked really elegant.

She straightened her slender waist, which accentuated the curve of her beautiful legs.
“Uwah, sister is so cool!” Martina commented with sparkling eyes.

Jessica tilted her head.

“… Is that so? Threatening them with a knife is the work of your beauty?”

“You saw it!?”

“As expected, that’s what happened.”

“Ughh… Before I bring them to the shadows of the building, it is the work of my beauty!”

She was too loud, so Jessica watched her surroundings.

—— Arara.

Even though they were conversing in Germanian, there were Belgarians who could understand too. Franziska lowered her voice quickly.

“Anyway, there is good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?”

“... Well… There’s nobody who would want to start with the bad news right?”

It seemed that way from the perspective of the listener.
“The good news is—— elder brother didn’t get hung. After all, executing such a famous figure would have great propaganda effects. Since there isn’t such news from the Fourth Army, he either escaped or is still alive… He is most probably employed. The Fourth Princess is passionate about improving her forces.”

Jessica said in the past:

“If she wanted to, he would have executed him already… Since she didn’t, the Princess must be hoping to take him in as a subordinate.”
Even Franziska agreed…

“I feel that the political struggle between the Second Prince and Fourth Princess has already concluded. The Emperor passed away right? Didn’t he already declare that he will take the throne?”

Jessica put the newspaper on the table.

It was published not long ago.

“That would be after the formal state funeral, it hasn’t reached the stage for the succession yet. He did say ‘I swear to inherit the will of my father to make the Belgarian Empire even more prosperous’.”

“Hmm?”
Franziska could speak Belgarian, but couldn’t read it. She could only make out single words. By the way, her sister Jessica was fluent in thirteen languages. According to her, the language of these nations mostly stemmed from the common tongue of an ancient Empire, so they were on the level of dialects. That ancient Empire was said to be destroyed by the Founding Emperor of Belgaria.

“... And? The bad news?”

In response to Jessica’s query, Franziska sighed.

“The Fourth Princess seemed to have left Fort Bonaire, and is returning to Fort Volks. They won’t pass through the capital.

“... I see.”

Jessica’s group traveled with Bastian in a shaky carriage. After they made a detour around the place they suspected to be the battlefield, the Fourth Army had already set off towards another direction.

When she saw how unmoved Jessica was, Franziska became anxious.

“I thought big sis could predict the location with divination!?”

“... Even without divining… The position of the Imperial Fourth Army isn’t important.”

“Why!? Big bro is there!”

“Even if we know his position, what’s the point?”

“Ughh…”

Indeed, the distance wasn’t the problem.

Even if the three of them infiltrate the Fourth Army, they wouldn’t be of any help to their brother Gilbert and his other captured companions —— that’s what Jessica divined.

Franziska felt the things Jessica see was different from what she saw.

“So, what should we do?”

“It is really easy to gather info from here to the Empire. First, let’s get in contact with the rest of ‘Renard Pendu’.”

“That’s right!”

Even though they lost the other day, that was just part of the mercenary band. There were still 700 odd mercenaries with the High Britannia First Division.

“... Well, 700 men wouldn’t be of much help in conducting a rescue operation.”

“It’s not enough!?”

Jessica looked up into the sky.

The sun was setting and the western sky was dyed a deep shade of red. It was almost time for dinner.

“... Yes… It’s not enough with just them… But we can’t ignore their will and strength. They are like the stars, sparkling in the night… Well then, at the side are Queen Margaret and his right hand man… there’s also the Second Prince and Fourth Princess… All of them are dazzling stars… Even though it is just looking up at the stars from the ground, but the capital is a very suitable place for that. After all, telling the future by astrology is my duty.”

“You mean we have to keep on collecting intelligence?”

“It will be fine. We are getting closer to elder brother.”

“Hah… Well… I will believe it since big sis says so…”

The Fourth Army was on their way back to Fort Volks. In terms of distance, they were gradually moving away from the capital.

“Sister, you are not feeling well?”

Martina looked at her worryingly.

It will be fine, Franziska said while patting her head.

“Hmm—— But what should we do? Even if we want to seek out our ‘Renard Pendu’ comrades, where are they now? With the way the situation is developing, wouldn’t High Britannia head back home? They will bring our comrades with them. Or would they dismiss them somewhere else?”

“Firstly, Oswald Coulthard isn’t that stupid to dismiss such a force.”

“That might be so, but isn’t Queen Margaret a little…?”

Franziska scratched her head.

Jessica didn’t deny.

“That’s true. Queen Margaret probably won’t withdraw. Let’s gather some information from the soldiers. They will probably pull something off with the Germanian Federation…”

“Why do you think that? Because of the stars?”

“… Before the war, they had frequent correspondence with the envoy of Langobalt Kingdom. What did you think their preparation is for, if not for such a situation?”

“Isn’t that simply preparation if they needed help to escape?”

“If Queen Margaret’s character could be seen through so simply, she wouldn’t have participated in her Army’s expedition to Belgaria. The High Britannia’s main forces had never lost any battle, so their losses were minimal.”

I see…

Even though they didn’t suffer much losses, they had to retreat because their supply lines were cut off.

With this in mind, it was understandable what their next move was.
“But, wouldn’t it be fine to not retreat from Fort Bonaire? Didn’t they hold a rather huge advantage?”

“… If they made any wrong decision, the battle would have ended. If they engage the First Army and the Fourth Army show up behind them, no matter how experienced the soldiers of High Britannia are,

there would be deserters.”

“Well, that’s true.”
The Empire also has reserves.

When the palace gets within their reach, there would be a good chance that enemy forces would hit them from behind.

“It wouldn’t be a victory even if they got into the capital” —— Jessica added.

Even though big sis claimed to be a diviner, she actually says strategist like things most of the time.

“Realizing they would be caught in a pincer attack, Queen Margaret led her troops away. However, if they receive resupply from Germanian Federation’s Langobalt Kingdom, things would be different… She isn’t a woman who will return home so easily.”

“Isn’t that Oswald guy the one commanding the High Britannia forces? Colonel Coulthard?”

“He is just enamoured with the Queen… His love is very pure… Even though he could see the trends of the war, he still took command of the army as he understood the wishes of the Queen.”

“He knew he would lose the battle?”

“... Franziska too, you knew that ‘Renard Pendu’ had lost, but still want to do something for elder brother right?”

“I-I am different from him!”

“... We fight wars for money, it’s something we have to do to survive.”
“That’s right!”

“... This is necessary for Queen Margaret too. In order for her to live on.”

“Why?”

Jessica shrugged. She said in a colder tone than before.

“… Probably to stave off boredom.”

Kek, Franziska gritted her teeth.

“I will blow her away, that damn woman.”

“… That’s why, High Britannia won’t bring ‘Renard Pendu’ back with them… If we can gather intelligence in the capital swiftly, not only will we have more opportunity for communication, we will have more options if our strength increases. Let’s prepare for now… Until the chance to rescue elder brother comes up.”

That’s the most important point. Franziska nodded.
“Yes, I will definitely rescue him! He is our brother after all! Our family!”

Jessica looked to the sky. The clouds seemed to be burning because of the setting sun.

“… The star of the Second Prince Latreille is shining brightly. Seems like he had obtained incredible power.”

It’s not the hour to see stars yet right? Franziska thought as she tilted her head.

“You mean the Empire will win?”

“That is definitely so. Because the tides of the war are clear, there is no value in divination… However, it’s not clear if they will lose something… Since the war is still ongoing, that is very possible.”

“Well, you are right.”

“… I think Queen Margaret will return to High Britannia in the end… If you gain something, you will lose something else.”

“That damn woman can still go back after creating this entire mess?”

“… However, her star in the west —— Probably her home country, there are dark clouds looming. What should we do?”

“Well, the conflict within High Britannia has nothing to do with us.”
“… That’s true.”
Clap! Martina raised both of her hands.

“Mister Bastian!”

Franziska looked up, and saw Bastian walked into the cafe.

He was a brown haired youth with a slender built. Just 16 years old, just like Franziska.

He was wearing sun glasses right now.
There seemed to be a reason why he was hiding his true identity.

A blonde girl was by his side. Even though she was a bit short and frail, she seemed to be the same age as him. She was Elise.

Franziska recalled their conversation in the carriage ——

That time, Jessica asked Elise with a calm tone:

“... By the way… Why did you lie about being a student studying abroad?”

“What!?”

The atmosphere in the carriage turned tense in an instant.

Bastian straightened his back.
Franziska witnessed Bastian’s strength before, so she became nervous. If this devolved into a battle, they would definitely lose.”

Elise seemed very calm.
“... Why do you think that is a lie?”
“The capital might turn into a battle field tomorrow… It would be dangerous if the Belgarian find out that you are a High Britannian, and you might be killed by the High Britannian Army by mistake too. If you are really an overseas student, it is too dangerous for you to head for the capital.”

“I see. It’s true, this was just a simple lie.”

Elise nodded in acknowledgement.
She admitted that was a lie immediately.

She pondered for a moment then said:
“Erm… I can’t divulge the details but… I escaped from High Britannia. I would go back some time, but that would be dependent on the situation within the country. As for why I am visiting the capital, it is to accompany Bastian on his goal.”

Bastian nodded with his arms crossed.

“I am not sure what I should do too! But I think I have to return to the capital.”

Elise smiled wryly.
“Going to the capital that might turn into a battlefield for such a reason? You might think it strange, but that’s how he is.”
—— *A retard?* Even though Franziska thought so, Bastian rescued her earlier, so she couldn’t said it out loud.

Jessica lowered her gaze.

“... We followed the High Britannia Army for some time before.”

Franziska’s body stiffened because her sister revealed this fact suddenly.
Bastian and Elise looked at Martina in surprise.

“This child too?”

Clap, she raised both hands.
“It’s —— true! Martina worked hard too!

“I see… It must have been hard…”
How should she explain this. Anyway, they didn’t seem to think of them as mercenaries. Franziska sighed in relief.

Jessica mixed in a lie.

“... We don’t have a home to go back to. So we want to seek refuge with an acquaintance in the capital.”

“So that’s it.”
Even though Bastian seemed agreeable, Elise didn’t look entirely convinced.

—— That was the conversation with masks they had in the carriage.

And their opponent back then, Bastian and Elise came to the table.

“Yo, sorry for the wait.”
“… Have you finished investigating the things you need?”
“There are some results. What about you? Found your acquaintance in the capital?”

Jessica looked at Martina, hesitant to speak.

She seemed to be hinting at something.
Elise seemed to realize something, and asked:
“Martina, have you eaten the cake in this shop?”

“Hmm?”
“They look delicious. Want some? I will buy them for you.”

“Really!? That’s great!”
By the way, the cake here is butter bread. Bread with sugar spread on top of it.
Although Franziska like that too… She decided to endure.
They left the table.
Her splendid performance impressed Franziska.
Jessica acted this way for two reasons. First was to bring away Martina who was bad at acting. Second was to draw the smart and observant Elise away from this conversation.

Right now, only Franziska, Jessica and Bastian were at the table.

Jessica lowered her head.

“… Thank you for your concern.”
“It’s nothing. There are things we don’t want kids to hear… So, what happened?”

Jessica said in a rarely seen depressed tone.
“… Regrettably, our acquaintance is gone… After asking the neighbours… The head of the family died in battle, and his widow went back to the countryside with her three children.”

That was a lie, of course.

They were mercenaries from the Germanian Federation, it was impossible for them to know anyone in the Imperial capital.

However, Bastian looked sympathetic, and showed an expression of regret.

“I see… Hmm… What are your plans now?”
“We are very troubled. Our money is running out.”

That was true.

If they were rich, they wouldn’t be mercenaries.

Even the continent’s strongest ‘Renard Pendu’ won’t possess gems like aristocratic ladies.

Even though the three sisters had the funds to return to the Germanian Federation, their objectives right now was to rescue their brother Gilbert.

They had to stay in the capital.

Jessica stared at the empty coffee cup on the table.

“... What… What should we do… Maybe I can write to another acquaintance for help?”
“Does he live near the capital?”

“... No. He is in the Germanian Federation. But there is no one else we can turn to. It pains me for my sister to live a hard life too.”

Hmm, Bastian crossed his arms and nodded.

Judging from his clothing, Bastian was a noble.

Not only was his clothes top quality, his sunglasses was expensive too.

In short, the plan was to ‘beg’. Jessica spoke plainly. But she didn’t blatantly show her tears and sorrow to him. By doing so, it will create an air of being troubled, and the situation won’t be too unrealistic.

Franziska wasn’t good at acting, but was great in a fight.

I should have followed Martina, I want to eat cake —— Despite thinking so, she lowered her head in order to not disrupt her sister. They just wanted this nobleman to spare a few days lodging fee from his dessert allowance.

“Alright, I understand.” Bastian slapped his knee.

“Just stay in my mansion. Others might talk unfavourably about this, but we are comrades who traveled and ate together. I could I abandon three girls? No, I won’t do that. Well… You won’t be treated like guests though, so how about it?”
The unexpected development made Franziska round her eyes.
“Are you for real!? Do you know who we are!?”

She asked without thinking.

Jessica kicked her under the table. *Unnecessary*—— that’s what she was implying.

How embarrassing.

Bastian smiled awkwardly.

“I don’t know at all. I am dull and can’t tell if someone is kind or evil… I failed miserably because of that before. However, I also dislike suspecting others.”
“… You are really a strange man.”
“Is that so?”

After finishing their conversation, Marina and Elise returned.
In Martina’s hand was a wooden plate, with five pieces of cake on it.
“We bought sister’s share too!”
“Ooh!?”

Franziska couldn’t help shrieking.

How embarrassing.

However, she had been on the battlefield all this while, so she hadn’t eaten any snacks for two months.

Elise asked:

“Bastian, how did the discussion go?”
“Ahh, they need to contact an acquaintance from afar instead. So I asked if they want to stay at my place for the time being.”
“What are you thinking, Bastian!?”

“What, you object?”

“Of course. Inviting young girls you just met back to your place is too shameless!”

“I-I’m not thinking about it that way!”

Bastian’s face reddened.

Franziska waved her hands.

“Ahh, not at all! No need to worry about that! We are fine with it! It will be a big help if you can let us stay! Erm, isn’t that right? Even though I am cute, that guy won’t do anything —— strange right?”

As usual, Jessica had an unreadable expression and said softly:

“… We won’t snatch him away, it will be fine.”

It was Elise’s turn to blush.

“I-I-I don’t mean that! I mean from a standpoint of a gentleman! And we are not in that kind of relationship!”

Martina ate her cake as if all these didn’t concern her.
“This is~ delicious!”

Bastian got up from his seat.

“A-Anyway! There are lots of empty room in the mansion, it will be fine! They won’t be staying in my room.”

“… I understand. I will be staying at Bastian’s place too, so I have no reason to refute other guests. My apologies.”

Franziska shook her head.

“No, not at all! It will be heavenly as long as there is a roof! Much better than camping in the rain and marching with the troops through

the night!”

“… That’s true.”

“Cough, is that so!? Really!? Just like heaven!?”

Martina whose mouth was stuffed with cake raised both her hands. There was no reason to reject.

Bastian smiled awkwardly.

“Looks like there aren’t any problems. Well then, let’s go. I have something to attend to tonight, so let’s finish this matter quickly.”

He walked out of the restaurant. Franziska and the others followed him closely.

The group walked along the streets under the evening sky.

Franziska pondered:

—— *If I succeeded in stalling the Beilschmidt Border Regiment… That strategist Regis Auric wouldn’t have made it to the front lines, the High Britannia supply line would be fine. We will defeat the Imperial First Army and take the Imperial capital…?*

She would then stroll with her brother Gilbert and her sisters along this street. Together with everyone from the mercenary band too.

Even though she took care not to show these feelings, she was still regretting in her heart, clenching her trembling fist.

There was an extravagant gate before them.

Bastian continued walking confidently.

They approached the Palace Le Brane.

Passing through the residence of the nobles, they finally reached the main gate of the palace. This gate was like an art masterpiece.

Even though they were at war, the gate was completely open. It might be a grand gate, but would be useless in a battle…
The Belgaria Empire really likes to turn things into art, Franziska thought in surprise.

In comparison, the culture of the Germanian Federation was plain and practical. At most, they would have reliefs to create unnecessary uneven surfaces.

Even though Franziska had gotten used to the plain designs back home, she still admired the grandiose of the Empire. And the palace, which stood at the peak of all these extravagancy, was before her eyes.

She sighed subconsciously.
But, what were they doing here?

Hey? Erm, why did you come to the palace? Sightseeing? Did you come to sightsee?"

"Well… How should I put this… Erm…"

Bastian scratched his head.

He then took his sunglasses off.

His crimson eyes shone under the setting sun and turned brighter shade of red.

"This is my home."

"Eh?"

Franziska couldn't understand momentarily, and turned stiff.
Jessica didn't look surprised at all, as she already noticed.
Even though Martina made a surprised sound "Whoaa——!?", she didn't seem to completely understand.

Finally, Elise sighed.

"... Even though I wanted to tell you earlier."

"Haha… I thought Elise already knew. Will it be strange if I introduce myself again?"

“It might feel strange, but you should still explain it clearly.”

“I see. But wouldn’t it be the same if they already understand?”

“That’s true.”
Once they started talking loudly, the guards at the gate approached them.

It was a soldier wearing top grade light silver armour.

“Hello there! Pardon me, but who are you? What is your business here?”

A slightly intimidating voice.

Franziska’s body turned stiff when she saw the Belgarian soldier approaching them, while Bastian answered openly.

“Ahh, just nice. Can you help me notify Marquis Bergerac?”

“About what?”

“I think he should still be the Minister of Ceremony… Maybe he will be fired this time.”

The guard was confused by his words, and stared closely at him.

“… Brown hair…. Eh? Crimson eyes…? Y-You… No, Sir… Are you…!?”

Bastian looked embarrassed as he brushed away his fringe.

“Well, it’s a bit embarrassing to state my own name—— I am Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria, Third Prince of Belgaria. My grandfather is Marquis Bergerac.”

The guard saluted loudly.

“M-My sincere apologies!! Please be lenient for our punishment!!”

“It’s fine. It’s natural for you to not know if I came back like this. But please, make haste.”

“By your command!”

The guard turned back and ran to the gate.

After he relayed the information, the other guards were stunned, and a lot of them scattered away.

Shortly after, a lot of maids rushed in briskly.

Followed by one person —— A stern elderly man with a chest full of medals and a mourning band on his arm.

“Bastian!? Is that really you!?”

“Yo Grandpa, I am back.”

“You are alive!”

“How mean…”

Before him was Marquis Bergerac. He was the Minister of the Ceremonial Ministry, father of the Third Consort, Bastian’s grandfather.

“You fool! After you ran out from that school, you went missing!”

“Ah…”

Now that he mentioned it, he didn’t contact the school again since he ran out of the classroom to chase Elise.

“And the war started shortly right after that… I felt that…”

“Hahaha! There’s no way I would die right?”
“Did something happen in High Britannia?”

“Not really. Their soldiers hacked and shot at me for a little though… Oh right, I met Queen Margaret and dueled with her right hand man. Oswald is amazing, and unreasonably strong.”

Marquis Bergerac collapsed dizzily onto the floor.

This sparked off a commotion with the maids, who shouted "Check it!" "Check his heart!" "The analgesics!"

Franziska who was listening in while standing at the edge could only think *‘What the hell is he saying!?’*

If she didn't witness Bastian's strength first hand, she would have treated this as a joke. However, he did seem capable of facing an army head on. In terms of combat abilities, he wasn't far off from her brother Gilbert.

The old noble glared at Bastian.

"C-Could it be that this war… is because of your mistake?"
"… Well, considering the fact that I failed to stop the war, it could be my fault. But Margaret is serious about declaring war."

"Just listening to what you say is enough to make my heart stop."

"That's not good. Talking with me is enough to make you unwell, maybe you need more exercise?"

"Moron! The problem lies with the content!"

"Hahaha… it sounds that interesting? Is my creative talent seeping through even in my everyday conversations?"

"Ughh, your actions created international problems everywhere. Tell what you did to Prince Latreille if you dare. It wouldn't be strange if he throw you into prison."

"What? Is my brother that sensitive now?"

"The Emperor just passed, and there is a large scale war after all. Even the Imperial Army suffered unprecedented losses."

"I see… Can you tell me the details about that? Isn't it strange that father died from old age? Didn't he just take in a new wife? And he was eating meat during the New Year party right?"
"Hmm…"
The elderly nobleman looked at Franziska and the others.

"Who are the ladies over there?"

Even though it was obvious that he was changing the topic, it was natural for him to ask about the unidentified guests.

How should I put it.

Bastian looked in the direction of Elise, Franziska, Jessica and

Martina.

“These are my friends.”

“… Friends?”

“They came from abroad, and don’t have a place to stay. Aren’t there plenty of spare rooms in the palace? Can you let them stay for a while?”

The wrinkle between the brows of the elderly nobleman became deeper.
“Ugu… What a reckless fellow.”
“You can’t?”

“This is a request from a royal to the Minister of Ceremony to ‘treat them like friends’ right? There is no reason for me to reject this. Which is the problem.”

“Hmm?”

“Hah… When the Emperor passed and many soldiers died in battle for the Empire, the Third Prince studying abroad in High Britannia came home with four women… This would become scandalous news.”

“Well, everything I do will become news anyway right?”

“Ughh… My old heart!”

As they conversed, the elderly noble ushered Franziska and the rest in.

Le Brane Palace——

The interior design could only be described as stunning.

Even though Bastian was the same as usual, Franziska and the others couldn’t speak as if they were overwhelmed.

Unspeakable extravagance.

If she visited this palace and still insisted on waging war against the Belgarian Empire, instead of being stupid, it was more likely that

Queen Margaret would be think of as being suicidal. Franziska thought.

Or maybe, she wanted this palace.

The elderly nobleman and Bastian had more things to discussed, and went to another room.
After stating their accommodation request, Elise was given a single room, Franziska and the others were given a room for three.

The zone under the jurisdiction of the Ceremonial Ministry always kept several rooms prepared in case of emergencies.

Franziska entered the room assigned to them and felt dazzled.

“Is this for real…”

“He is an unexpected big shot.”
“I thought big sis already noticed.”

“... The stars didn’t tell me this much.”

“Or rather, if you ask them right from the start, they probably won’t tell you.”

“... You mean the stars?”

“Yes, the stars. Hah… I thought we would need to sneak into a stables to sleep… But now, we have beds with canopy and sheets with golden threads…”
Waaahhhh, Martina pounced onto the bed.

“There isn’t any smell of straws!”

Jessica told her: “High class mattresses are stuffed with cotton.”

Even famous mercenaries were poor. And of course, Franziska had never slept on cotton bed before.

It was too extravagant, which made her heightened emotions cool down instead.

“I will sleep on the floor.”

“... What’s the matter?”

“Even though big bro is suffering in captivity… But we are sleeping here…”
“... Don’t be stupid. If you accumulate too much fatigue, you won’t be able to use your strength during the critical moments and fail in rescuing elder brother. Don’t think of such meaningless things.”

“E-Even so…”

“If you say that, that kid will also sleep on the floor.”

“Ah…”

Looking up, she could see Martina sleeping in the middle of the bed. Even though it was just evening, she must have been very tired.

Jessica sat on a luxurious chair in the corner of the room. Embroidered cushions were placed on the chair, and its legs had beautiful patterns. It matched her unexpectedly well.

“... They said that dinner would be brought to our room, I will wake you when they come. Franziska, just rest for now.”

“What about you, sis?”

“... I have things to think about for now, so I will sleep later.”

“Then I will too! I don’t know much about thinking, but I can wield a weapon.”

“... If the maids come in with dinner… and see you with a crossbow, they will definitely scream.”

“Ughh.”
“... Alright, just sleep first. You don’t look well.”
“But I always look cute!”

Jessica smiled gently.
“... In order to protect us, you have been on edge this entire time. The stars told me that this place is safe. Take a rest for now. Thank you, Franziska.”

“I see…”

The stars and things like that couldn't be trusted.

But she felt like sleeping when Jessica asked her to rest.

—— Is this her spell?

Franziska laid onto the bed. Her consciousness fell into deep slumber.

After Bastian finished talking to his grandfather, he ate his dinner quickly and returned to the back of the palace.

He changed into clothes befitting a Belgarian noble, and tidied his attire.
Elise stood beside him.

"You finished your conversation with your grandfather?"
"I already asked the necessary questions. If we talk further, he will lecture me until morning. So I ran off after apologizing."

"… It must be hard."

"That's right."

"I mean for your grandfather."

"Eh!? Well… I didn't get into this mess because I want to."

"Fufu, just kidding. So, did you talk about anything that bothered you? You don't look so good…?"

Bastian washed away the dirt of his travel with perfumed water, and wore top quality clothes and sunglasses.

He looked less tired than this morning —— but was shocked that Elise noticed such a minute change.
By the way, Elise was wearing a Belgarian noblewoman laced dress. The dark green dress matched her blonde hair really well.

Normally, tailor shops would send their workers to take

measurements, and the clothes would only be ready after a week, and intrinsic costumes would take a month. Even the Ceremonial Minister won't push for a dress to be fitted immediately to keep up appearances.

"You look really cute in that dress."

"Eh!? W-What… are you saying, Bastian is really…"
His abrupt words made Elise blush.

"Alright, the heroine in my next work will wear this then."

"… I knew it would turn out like this."

She sighed.

Such incidents only happen because Bastian was always collecting material for his 'future masterpiece'.

Back to topic.

Bastian scratched his combed head.

"Well, I asked about many things… But I am most concerned about my brother and father."
"Once again, I express my condolence for the passing of the Emperor."
"No, it's that… Brother is something who would do that."

"Eh?"

Bastian checked his surroundings.

He was walking on the widest road in front of the Belgarian palace. Even though it was well lit after the sun setted, there weren't many pedestrians due to the recent passing of the Emperor. At least, there wasn't anyone close enough to listen in on their conversation.

"I didn't see it or have any proof. But, my brother entered the room of father and his newly wedded wife… And found them dead. Isn't that strange? Also right now, brother's heavy infantrymen are guarding the door and the only ones who could enter freely are the chamberlain, a few doctors and the maids."

“W-Well, since that is the chambers of the Emperor and the place he passed, unauthorized persons shouldn’t be allowed to go near…”

“There’re rumours that even the personal doctor of the wife was forbidden entry, earning the wrath of the Estaburg Kingdom and threatening war.”

“War!?”
“Well, the Belgarian Empire is always at war, so it’s normal for relations with other nations to deteriorate. We refused to send her body back to her home country nor let her doctor inspect the corpse, it’s weird right?”
“… That is very true.”

A gloomy cloud loomed over Elise’s face.
She realized the possibility that the truth might differ from the official report on the cause of death of Consort Johaprecia Octovia.

Which was regicide.

Elise asked with a disappointed expression.

“Why do the people in the Empire allow such violence?”

“The same reason why High Britannia couldn’t bring Queen Margaret to justice. There is no evidence. There are many suspicious points, but nothing decisive. Also, many of the ministers acknowledge that my brother is qualified to be the next Emperor.”

“… How could this be… Isn’t he a rebel?”

“Well, my father isn’t that passionate about politics and military affairs. And High Britannia seems to be losing.”

“That’s the problem here!?”

“There isn’t any doubt that this nation is seeking a strong ruler. Even though I don’t think this is right… The nation will definitely fall if the monarch is weak.”

“So they acknowledge him…”
“The chamberlain Marquis Beclard accepted him, and the grand nobles around the capital belonged to the Second Prince’s faction.

Instead of facts, the focus is on which choice would yield the most benefits."

"You think this is fine too?"
Bastian crossed his arms.
"Hmm… Instead of the facts, isn't what he will do after becoming Emperor more important?"

"… You think the same way too…"
"Like I said, I think this is correct. After all, I promised that guy."

He gently touched the leather pouch on his waist. The notebook of Roland, a friend he met in High Britannia was inside.

It was a book he wrote in order to spread liberalism.

There is a way for all men to pursue happiness and freedom ——
That's what he said.

Right now, there wasn't any freedom in the Belgarian Empire. The nobles indulged in luxury, the commoners were oppressed, and the unending war continued to rob countless lives and wealth.

"There need to be a change. However, I don't think everything about the Belgarian Empire is bad. We shouldn't destroy the Empire completely."

"That's true. I also feel that a dramatic revolution will bring misfortune to the masses."

"What should be changed, what should stay the same… I don't understand. That's why, I will ask someone who might know."
"Yes."
And so, Bastian and Elise walked down the street that night.

After leaving the residential zone of the nobles and the central area with shops geared towards the aristocrats, they headed towards the outer region where most of the commoners lived.

Turning into an alley from the main road, they saw a bar just before they got lost.
The building was built with red bricks, and several times the size of other houses, which made it look huge.

Even though most of the buildings in the vicinity closed their windows and doors, and the streets were quiet with few people on the streets, only this shop had light shining out of its open windows. The wooden door was also half opened.

A sign hanging above the entrance had the word ‘Provenus’.

Bastian opened the door.

A lamp hung from the ceiling, and the room was brightly lit.

At the counter to the left of the entrance was a staff cleaning wine glasses. He slanted his eyes and looked Bastian’s way.

There was a screen inside the bar, and the seat behind it wasn’t visible. It divided the space into another room.

In the center was a large round table, with four messy tables placed in other places. Several men with wooden mugs placed their elbows on the table.

The patrons were all adults.

About thirty odd men in total.

There wasn’t just food on the table, but newspapers and books too. It appears to be not just a simple bar.
They stopped their discussion, and looked at Bastian and Elise with sharp eyes.

In Belgaria, one was considered an adult at age 15, so Bastian and Elise were adults. There wasn’t any problem with them being here.

However, they still attracted a lot of attention.

Elise was a bit scared, and tugged on Bastian’s sleeve.

“E-Erm… Do we need to come here? Will we be fine inside?”

She whispered.

“Now that you mentioned it, you have to be 17 to be considered an adult in High Britannia. You can’t enter a bar at 16 right?”

“Because you can only drink if you are an adult.”
“But in Belgaria, you are an adult at 15.”

“... Well, it would be an issue if they conscripted kids into the army, so the law is written that way to accommodate this fact. Be it mentally or physically, those who are not 17 are not of age yet. There are even some nations who set the mark at 18 or 20.”

“Even if one is 15, they could still kill an enemy in single combat. It is only natural to treat someone who can kill others as an adult. This is also a form of respect to the enemy who are killed.”

“It is because of such thinking that makes the Belgarian Empire neglect the rights of women no matter how much time passes… Well… Enough about that… Is the person we are looking for here?”

“It’s my first time meeting her too.”
Bastian walked into the depth of the bar.
The customers simply stared at him in silence. He was really prominent after all.

—— *They seem to be wary of something?*

He asked the staff behind the counter.

“Is it convenient?”
“Sorry dear customer. Our bar don’t have tea that suits the taste of a young master.”

Even though his words were polite, it was the same as saying ‘go on home you brat’.
They might be plenty of commoners who hated nobles in other cities, but there weren’t many of them in the capital.

Bastian said with a smile:

“Don’t make such a scary face. I am looking for someone. Her name is Bourgine.”

The staff scowled his face when he heard that name.
The bar turned quiet.

Gaze that was filled with annoyance and wary turned into obvious hostility.
One patron —— A well built man drew his sword.

The other patrons scrambled to the wall to avoid being drag in.
Armed with a sword, the man approached.
He didn't exert unnecessary strength on his shoulder and arm. From the numerous scars on his muscular arm sticking out of his shirt, he had the bearing of a veteran.

He was probably a soldier, or served in the past.
"Professeur Bourgine isn't here. Go home. This is not a place for a noble brat like you to play."

"Can I assume that I need to make an appointment before I can come here?"

"I already told you to scram."

"I refuse. I have to meet that person."

"You want to die, you noble brat!?"
The man swung his sword.
Half the people yelled 'finish him off!', the other shouted 'don't be rash!'

The sword sliced down.

But Bastian didn't move.

Elise who was hiding behind yelped "Hya!?" softly, but that was all.

The blade flashed before his eyes.
It didn't reach —— Bastian could already tell.

"I am not here to fight, I have some important business with Bourgine. I promised my friend."

"I don't know the reason… But no matter what it is, the Professeur won't meet a noble like you!"

His opponent took a step forth.
The next swing will definitely reach.

Bastian could dodge, but he had to protect Elise behind him. To be safe, it would be better to defend with his body.

There would be no room for discussion if I draw my dagger. Aside from this bar, I don't have any other clue in finding that person.

—— *Can't I do something unarmed?*

Bastian clenched his right fist with a crack.

The man slashed down.
A sharp voice came from behind him.

"Stop!"
That man froze.

All eyes in the bar turned to the owner of that voice.

A woman holding a walking stick appeared from a seat behind the screen.

She wore a long dress, and had a scarf hanging down over her green blouse. It was the dressing of a normal citizen.

She was about 30 years old.
Her legs seemed unwell, so she had to use a walking stick.
There wasn't anything special about her brown hair that was tied up, and hung over her chest. Her skin was pale and her limbs slender like a patient.

However, the man with the sword backed away after meeting her gaze.

"Master, you can't come out! He might be a soldier sent by the noble faction!"

"A child like that? Without even a sword?"

"You can never be too safe."

"Just intimidating with words would be fine, but if you really slash at

him, that would be violence, not a warning. I don’t remember asking you to protect something like that.”

“I-I didn’t plan on cutting him down for real…”

The man sheathed his blade.

She asked Bastian:

“You mentioned a promise with your friend?”

“Ah, yes I did… Could you be Bourgine?”

“They call me that, but I don’t know if the Bourgine you are looking for is me.”

“Do you know Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde?”

Her eyes slightly widened.

She then sighed.

“That child is studying abroad in High Britannia.”

“Yes, we met Roland in High Britannia.”

“Roland is looking for me?”
“Erm… Not really, but it concerns him… it will take some time to explain.”

Bastian felt pained when he thought about Roland. Elise lowered her gaze.

Bourgine pointed inside the bar.

“Can you tell me more?”
The patrons who had been observing cautiously showed surprised expressions.
“Professeur!? Is this fine!?”

“… I just want to hear what he has to say. Have I ever been afraid of anyone?”

No one refuted her.

There was a round table behind the screen, and besides it was a

two seater couch.

Further into the bar were scattered barrels, bricks and pieces of wood.

Bastian and Elise sat down on a couch.

She introduced herself as Morgane Bourgine. She was a commoner who used to work as a teacher in a certain school in the capital, and was living in seclusion right now.

Bastian and Elise was using the alias they used in High Britannia. They did not trust the other party completely yet.

“If you are living in seclusion, does that mean someone is after your life?”
“Well, the nobles are targeting me… Because I exclaimed my objection to the policies of the nation publicly.”

“What kind of objection?”

“Fufu… In the open plaza three years ago, I shouted ‘This country is rotting’.”

“Eh!?”

“The minority ruling class are oppressing the commoners making up the majority of the population, we have to change this situation. Human should have the inalienable rights to pursue happiness.”

“The open plaza? You mean the one in front of the palace!?”

“That is the place where the most number of people gather right?”

Bourgine nodded, making Bastian break out in cold sweat.

The ideology she was propagating was known as ‘Liberalism’.

Since Roland was a liberal, then the one who taught him that ideology would be a philosopher.

But to shout it out in public…

“Isn’t that reckless?”

“But it’s not against the law.”

“True… But wouldn’t you be targeted by the nobles and earn their ire?”
“I was fired by the school that day. They said that there was a problem with my working attitude.”

Elise raised her brow.

“How tyrannical!”
Bastian sighed.

“That’s what happens if you go against the aristocrats in the Empire…”

“That’s right. They think that oppressing commoners and weeding out dissidents are natural. Just like reaping harvest from the field and pulling off the weeds.”

“If you knew such people would be your enemy, was there a need to make such a strong speech in the open plaza?”

She nodded.

What a strong willed woman.

“Although I lost my job, but thanks to the support of those who agree with me, the liberalism movement could go on. I have been to High Britannia several times because my mother is a native there. I shared what I experienced there with the people around me.”

“Everyone has the right to pursue happiness… huh.”
“That’s right, and as I was continuing that movement, that child visited me.”

She was talking about Roland.

When he was 13, he came to the capital with his merchant grandfather, and heard the speech Bourgine gave at the open plaza.

After that, he returned to the south and self studied for a year. In order to learn more, he used all means to sought her out.

That really suited Roland’s fanatical style, Bastian nodded.

“That child is very smart, learning tirelessly like sand absorbing water. He learned High Britannian by himself at home too. After that, he wanted to study even more in depth knowledge.”

“So he went to study abroad?”

“Yes… Even though I tried stopping him as it would be dangerous if war breaks out.”

Bastian was shocked.

“You knew war will break out!?”
“That’s right. I knew that the pro-war faction in High Britannia was gaining popularity, so it was just a matter of time before war breaks out.”

Elise’s expression gloomed.

“War did break out, so your prediction was correct… But there are many who opposed the war too.”

“Yes, I know that too. However, I don’t think they could stop the tide of war. It is very regrettable.”

“… That’s true.”

Bastian tried their best to stop High Britannia from declaring war against Belgaria, but they failed in the end. Elise’s face turned dark as she recalled all that.

Bourgine shrugged.

“Alright then… That’s how my relationship with Roland is. Well? Am I the Bourgine you are looking for?”
“Yes, we didn’t get the wrong person.”

He never doubted that she was, but he stilled answered anyway.

Bastian then took a deep breath.

To be honest, he was more nervous than the time he dueled with Oswald, or when he leapt off the tower.

Bourgine was Roland's teacher. The teacher who influenced his life and thoughts heavily.
And she was very concerned with the well being of her student.

He had to tell her.

It wasn't the first time he informed another person about a death, but he had never felt so much pressure and a heavy heart before.

He looked her in the eyes.

"Roland… is dead…"

Bourgine closed her eyes and fell silent.

She mourned his passing for a moment.
Opening her eyes, she simply nodded without asking for more details.

"... Roland had his ambitions. No matter what the outcome is, it is the result of his decision. If I listen to the circumstances of his death and say 'that is his wish' or 'he must have regrets'... it would be sacrilegious to his will."

"So that's how you feel."
Bastian used to think that Roland was sad and full regrets. It was hard to accept the way he died.

However, he might be wrong to think of it that way.
Bourgine said:

"More important would be what the two of you think."

"... I… Want to inherit his will. What he entrusted to me —— was to let the world progress. Progress into a world where everyone can pursue their own happiness."

"For the sake of your friend?"

"That's part of the reason. But I am thinking, maybe what he say might be true. That's how I feel after reading this."

Bastian took the book out from his pouch.

This was the book left behind by Roland.

He placed it on the table.

Bourgine took the book.

She flipped through it slowly and sighed.
“It’s just like that child to write down his ideals.”

“Is it wrong?”

“No… In the first place, there isn’t any right or wrong for ideals. After reading this, do you think this is right?”
“Yes but… I don’t think I understand it completely. So, I need someone to teach me. If possible, I hope that would be you.”

She smiled wryly.

“I am not sure how I should understand this… But liberalism is an ideal that would be disadvantageous to you nobles.”

“How would it be disadvantageous? Losing the privilege passed down to me by my ancestors? Those things don’t matter to me. I am betting my life on this… I will have no qualms if that’s all I will lose, I am even prepared to give my life if needed. Even though I failed…”

His wish of bringing Elise to the Royal castle and to keep Roland alive had both failed.

“… The people around you will object strongly though.”
“I am used to being criticized by others. What I need aren’t such things.”

“You want to learn from me… Are you serious?”
“Do I look like I am joking?”

Bastian already made up his mind.

Ughh… Elise could only show a dissenting expression.

Bastian already knew what she was going to say. Unlike High Britannia, the Belgaria Empire treated liberalism as a dangerous ideology and suppress it, even though there wasn’t any official restriction against liberalism.

If the people around him knew he was a liberal, he would lose his standing in society. After all, no princes had ever held such an ideology before.

And with his brother Latreille in power, there was no telling what he would do to Bastian who was a Liberal.

Despite all that ——

“I have to learn it. If I want to inherit his will, I have to learn the same thing as him right?”

“But, a child of nobility…”
“I am not a child, and Roland is a nobleman too.”

“That’s true… Back then, he troubled me deeply too. Was teaching him the right thing to do…?”

Bourgine frowned.

Bastian straightened his back.

“If you can only teach commoners, then I will break off ties with my family! Is that good enough!?”

At this moment, noise came from the other side of the screen.

“Someone told the guards that there is a commotion in this bar.”

From the tone, the one who entered were the police.

Bastian lowered his voice.

“... I created a disturbance?”
“... No. They are sent by the nobles… to look for me. We will talk about this next time.”

Bourgine picked up her walking stick and walked towards the piles of random items.

And reached out.

The side of the barrel opened.

—— It turned into a door!!

The seemingly useless barrel was used to conceal a door.

It had stairs that led downwards.

Some patrons were talking to the police at the storefront.

“Ara~ nothing~ happened here alright?”
“We will see after our investigations are done! Make way!”

“What are you searching for? Do explain to us properly. We will help you.”

They were stalling for time.

Bourgine climbed down the stairs in the barrel on her four limbs. She moved slowly because her legs weren’t well.

“... I don’t plan on showing myself to the police. What about you two?”

“I will follow.”
The police were supposed to catch criminals. However, being a liberal wasn’t against the law. Bastian didn’t understand.

Did this woman commit some crime and was running away?

Even so, he finally got to meet Roland’s teacher.

He needed to talk to her.

Bastian climbed into the stairs too.
“Elise, we are in a hurry, but it’s wet here, be careful not to slip.”

“I-I understand.”

She climbed down timidly too.

It was pitch dark down here.
Bourgine whispered:
“This way.”
“Ahh, I see it.”

“… There isn’t any light here?”

“I know. That’s why I took off my sunglasses.”

Bastian could only vaguely see Bourgine’s figure walking forward while holding on to the wall.

He held Elise’s hand and advanced in the darkness.

It smelled moldy.

And smell like wine.

This was probably the underground cellar. But the air was full of dust, so maybe it was not in use anymore.

They continued in deeper.

Bastian could gauge the direction and distance he was moving accurately even if he closed his eyes.

They were leaving the bar from this underground passage.

What building was behind the bar?

Anyway, he knew they were moving to the underside of that building.

They walked along the wall, climbed up a flight of wooden stairs and returned to street level.

“Hmm… I see… It’s a secret tunnel to escape. How cool.”

“I didn’t break any laws, but the police are dangerous. I have to very careful with them.”

This was the ground floor of another building.

After leaving the pitch dark room, they went outside which was well-lit by the moon ——

Bourgine shivered.

“…!?”

After exiting the undecorated warehouse, they came to a narrow

alley.

Unlike the rest of the capital, the ground here wasn't paved with stone, and was only used to transport cargo.

Figures appeared in the faint moonlit night.

Soldiers wearing black uniform.

The police.

Bastian put on his glasses swiftly and stood beside Bourgine. It shouldn't be dangerous since the opponents were policemen who uphold the law. But he took action after seeing how frightened she was.

"… Looks like an ambush."
"They actually…"
Her voice was trembling.

There were five policemen, and one of them stepped forward.

A man with a gentle face.

"Madame Bourgine I presume?"
"Yes…"

"Where are you going at such an hour?"

"I-I'm on my way home…"
"Fufu, where do you stay? It's dangerous at night. Allow me to escort you home."

"Thanks but no thanks."
That policeman glanced at Bastian and Elise. Bastian seldom appeared in public, so not many people know what he looked like. It was hard to imagine the Third Prince appearing in a place like this.

Their target seemed to be Bourgine, so they paid no attention to the two of them.

"Madame, we have reports of thieves striking here."

"I see… How scary."

“To be safe, can you let us check your belongings?”

“Y-Yes…”
Bourgine nodded.

Bastian had never been inspected by the police before. They probably hate liberals.

The only belongings Bourgine had was just a cane.

There shouldn’t be any problems.

She would just arrive home a bit late. Bastian thought naively.

When the policeman patted down her waist ——

They looked surprised.

“What is this!?”

The policeman opened his hands, showing a pair of golden earrings embedded with gems.

Bourgine shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

“Hohoo? This looked similar to stolen item reported by a citizen. Why do you have this on you!?”

“It has nothing to do with me. You came near me with that thing in your hand. Stop pretending to be retarded!”

“This is found in your pocket!”

“My clothes don’t have pockets.”

“Still trying to quibble about this!? Alright, take her in. We will investigate further at the station!”

Bourgine turned stiff.

The other policemen surrounded her on command to not let her escape.

"I know nothing, this is an injustice!"

“If you have anything to say, do it at the station.”

“Even if you tell me that, none of my companions ever came back from there!”

“Shut it! You destructive ideology instigator!”

The policemen reached for her.

—— *They are doing such things!?*

Bastian was shocked.

The ones who should be upholding the law did something so unscrupulous.

Bastian stood in front of Bourgine.

And faced off against the policemen.

“Isn’t this too much? I won’t go off with you all like this!”

“… From your dressing, you are a child of nobility… You know who that woman is?”

“I know. She is addressed as teacher by many people, including my friend. I should be asking you, what’s the deal with those earrings? A female thief walking around the street with a walking stick, keeping stolen items in her pocket? Stop bullshitting!”

“Huh!?”

“You think such a rubbish setting is forgivable!? If I am the reader, I will never accept it!”

“What are you talking about!?”
“The law doesn’t restrict discussion on liberalism! Using excuse to make arrests despite of that, are you really the police that maintain public order in the Imperial Capital!?”

His opponent stammered.

“I don’t know which noble House you are from… But she is a liberal!

We can’t just let her go. Alright, take this kid in too!”

“I am not a noble.”

“Oh, a commoner. Your clothes are really high in quality.”

“I’m not a commoner either.”

“... What?”

Bastian took off his sunglasses.

Brush back his brown fringe.

Revealing his crimson eyes.
“I am the Third Prince of Belgaria, Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria. I will remember all of your faces. It won’t be over so simply, brace yourself!”

“What!?”

The faces of the men all turned pale as they looked at each other.

Their shoulders trembled because of doubt and anxiety.

“... Y-You are a Prince? To actually…”

“Are you policemen doing such dirty deals all this while? On whose orders? The police is part of the military, and report to the Ministry of Military Affairs right? Is it the Minister’s orders? Who issued the order to apprehend Bourgine?”

The policemen’s faces reddened as Bastian asked his series of questions.

Their eyes turned bloodshot.

Their faces immediately scowled in anger.

“... Ugghhh… I-Impersonator! This guy must be an impersonator! It’s impossible for His Highness to be in a place like this, covering for a liberal!”
He yelled.

After all, liberals opposed the existence of the Emperor the most.

The Emperor was above all laws, and all citizens had the obligation to serve him unconditionally. Everything owned by the Belgarian Empire could be used at the Emperor's pleasure.
As the sons of the Emperor, Princes enjoyed extraordinary privileges.

So on the matter of ideology, they would never tolerate liberalism. It was natural for the policemen to think in such a way.

Bastian sighed.

"... As expected… Because of one's standings, there was no use in talking."

"Impudent Impersonator of His Highness! This is Lèse-majesté! I will mete out your execution right here!!"

It wasn't clear if the policemen were certain that Bastian was an impersonator, or they wanted to seal his lips out of fear.

No matter the reason, the one at the front drew his sword.

It wasn't the longsword used by soldiers on the frontline, but shorter single edged sabre. It was easier to use a shorter blade in urban terrain, and the lighter weight made it easier for patrols.

The other policemen also drew their swords and took their stance.

Bastian drew the dagger from his waist.
The Emperor's sword.

Legends say that the Founding Emperor 'L'Empereur Flamme' forged seven treasured swords with the Tristei that was bestowed to him by the fairies.

Bastian was holding the treasured sword known as 'Vite Espace Trois'.

The hilt had elegant carvings, and it had a triangular blade that was wide at the base and narrow at the tip.

It was about 4Pa (30cm) in length. It was supposedly as long as the feet of the 'L'Empereur Flamme'.

Even though he took it out from the vault just half a year ago, he could use it smoothly now.

There wasn't any feeling of excitement.

He didn't exert any unnecessary strength in his hand.

As if he wasn't holding anything, he could wield it as easily as if he was just swinging his arm.

The policemen thrust their swords at him.

"Ahhhyaaa!!"

Even though it was in the middle of the night, their shouts lack force and their movements were slow.

—— That's how soldiers who had never been to the frontlines were like.

Bastian wielded his dagger.

Clink! A crisp sound echoed in their ears.

The sabre's blade fell to the policeman's feet.

The policeman’s sword broke at the base. No, it was Bastian who

cut it off.

He looked at his opponents with slanted eyes.

“… The next slash would be for your heads. I have steeled myself to not show mercy for the things I want to protect.”

“Ugh, uggghhhh…”

The men backed away, even the one leading them were frightened.

Rumours that the Third Prince of Belgaria being absurdly strong was well known. In terms of pure physical abilities, he was stronger than Latreille, who was the Field Marshal.

The policemen finally realized who their opponent was, as they trembled with a pale face.

A moment later, one man fled ——

The others then followed, screaming like kids in their flight.

Bastian sheathed his dagger.

“Ah… I let the chance to ask them who issued the order to arrest Bourgine slip.”

“Bastian, are your wounds okay!?”

“Hmm? As you can see, not even a scratch.”

Elise who was looking at him worryingly was relief after hearing him answering in his usual tone.

Bastian was heavily injured not too long over. His wounds have healed, but he had not recovered fully yet.

Bourgine’s brows furrowed deeper.

“… Are you really Prince Bastian?”

“Yes.”

“What is the meaning of this? Since you read Roland’s book, you should understand what liberalism is.”

“To a certain extent. Is it strange for a prince to be a liberal?”

“… It’s hard to believe. Why would those who hold power think about destroying the current system?”

“I am not holding anything. This might make you angry… but I have gotten tired of luxury when I was 10, and the rules in the palace that I have to follow depressed me. Instead of that, I would rather fulfill the will that guy entrusted to me.”

“For Roland?”

“That’s part of the reason… But after reading his book, I think that ‘the Empire right now is wrong’. However, I didn’t study hard enough, so I don’t understand… What needs to be changed, and what needs to stay the same.”

“What if I tell you that I am thinking of destroying the Empire?”

“No matter what you tell me, I will judge by myself. If I think it is right, I am fine with the Empire being destroyed. But right now, I don’t think that is correct.”

Bourgine nodded.

“You might not be able to enjoy the life you lived so far.”

“You too, you can live as a teacher if you kept in line right? Why did you make that speech in the open plaza?”

“For my personal justice.”

“If that’s so, I am the same. Even if I might lose something, I have to do the right thing.”

Bourgine asked Elise who was beside Bastian.

“What about you?”

“... I… am actually from High Britannia. I will go back one day. To prepare for that day, I want to learn more about Belgaria. I won’t stay with Bastian if I get in his way…”

“Oh, I don’t mind you coming along. But you might encounter danger just like earlier.”
“It’s fine. For those with ambition, such things occur very often.”

Elise smiled and Bourgine shrugged.

“Would a noble aristocratic lady say that ‘such things occur very often’? You seemed very experienced?”

“Fufu… Perhaps so.”

Chased by rifle toting soldiers in the forest, traveling away from the cities for days, betrayed by her uncle, escaping from a fortress full of soldiers, jumping off a cliff…

Compared to these, their earlier encounter was ‘nothing much’.

Bastian said once again:

“Bourgine, I hope you can show me the way. As for whether I will take this path, I will decide for myself.”

“... As expected, you are a Prince. When asking someone to teach you, you will say ‘Teach me please’, alright?”

“Ugh… Sorry.”

He had never used such words even to his father the Emperor. In other words, he had gotten used to it and couldn’t change his speaking style all of a sudden.

Bourgine squinted her eyes.

“Since you want to change, there are two ways here. Go back to the palace, and tell the Second Prince, Latreille your ideas… Depending on the way you present it, some of your proposals might be accepted, and this country will change for the better a little. Becoming a slightly more equal and free nation.”

“The other way?”

“... Mobilize the citizens. Emperors and nobles are not necessary for a country to exist. A country exists because of its people. Everyone had forgotten that… So to change the nation, we have to change the citizens. Can you do that?”

He couldn’t answer immediately.

If one were to say, that feeling would be very natural.

“... Change the citizens huh.”

“If you want to do that, you have to watch your words and language. If you are going to order others around like a prince, then you should go back to the palace.”

“I-I get it! No, erm… I understand!”

He stood up straight like a palace guard.

Pfft, Elise broke into laughter.
“I-It doesn’t suit you at all, Bastian.”

“Ara… My apologies. People have things they are good at, and aspect they are suitable for. You can learn the words by studying hard. As for the other things, you will have to remember it by heart.”

“Don’t say that with a laugh! That’s strange! Erm… other things? Can you tell me, Bourgine?”

“At least address me as ‘Professeur’. Since you helped me from the police and is an acquaintance of Roland… I will teach you everything I know.”

“I will be in your care, Professeur Bourgine!”

Bastian reached out his right hand.

Bourgine also reached out and shook his hand.

“I should be saying that. I have high expectations of you, Bastian.”

Elise turned her head suddenly.

Someone seemed to be looking at them with a smile under the

shadow of the moonlight —— She felt such a sensation.

Chapter 2 - The Delivered Letter

“We will stop here for now!”

Baltasar shouted.

“Uwaahhhh~!!”

Altina collapsed to the ground panting.

She stretched her limbs out freely.

Her breathing was ragged.

The grass was soft, the sky dazzling and the air smelled refreshing.

Her sweat dripped onto the grass from her skin.

Her hands were numb.

Eddie was slightly further away, panting as hard as she did.

But he seemed to have some strength left. Even though he was sitting, he kept his body straight.

There was a broken wooden sword on the ground.

“Hah… That’s tiring…”

“You two are too weak! Panting that hard from just this much training!”

The one bellowing loudly was Baltasar.

White bandages covered his right arm up until his fingers, because he fractured his arm in the battle against the Mercenary King Gilbert.

He actually just needed to stabilize his arm, but he would pick up a sword if his fingers were exposed, so the lady doctor bandaged his fingers too.

He couldn’t hold a sword, so he supervised Altina and Eddie’s training and teach them.

“Hah… Hah… Baltasar, this is probably the first time… you taught me footwork and body stance.”

“I don’t remember being taught in such detail before.”

Eddie shrugged.

They were on the roof of Fort Volks right now.

As this fort was built by carving out the inside of a cliff, it was natural for there to be earth on top. There was a watering station nearby too.

This place would be great for farming, but it was left alone with minimum maintenance because ‘performing farm work above Her Highness’ head is disrespectful’.

Even though Altina didn’t mind, the soldiers didn’t really want to do it. For religious people, having plenty of earth above the head of the commander was a bad omen. According to the beliefs of the native, earth meant defeat.

But since this was a fortress built out of a cave, it was only natural for there to be earth on top of them…

It seemed that their luck was great because Altina lived at the top level, and the roof was for the commander's personal usage.

So after receiving the agreement from the troops, Altina used the rooftop as a training ground.

It could be used as a vantage point during battles, but the winds were too strong so only Altina's group were the only ones to use it normally.

It was the same now, as the strong wind caressed their bodies.

They thought about their training earlier as they enjoyed the breeze.

"... Eddie is amazing."

"Hmmp, don't fall for me now."

"... If you are not an idiot, that might be possible. If you are not an idiot."

"Don't say that twice."

Altina propped herself up.

And looked at the sword in her hand.

It was the reforged 'Grand Tonnerre Quatre'. The hilt was very heavy, just like a hammer. The handles were rough, so leather was wrapped around it for smoother usage.

The design was plainer than the swords in fashion right now, and all of its parts were thicker now.

The sword had reverted to its original state by the hands of Blacksmith Enzo from Rouen City.

Even though it was much heavier than before, it was easier to wield as the balance had been improved.

Altina could only launch singular attacks as if she was wielding a

hoe. But now, she could smoothly attack consecutively.

However, she still couldn't keep up with Eddie's speed. She could only win once for every three losses.

He could probably rival Latreille in speed.

"Hmm… I can handle slashes, but I can't keep up with the tempo of thrusts…"

"Maybe spears are really stronger on the battlefield."

"Spears are the first option. I can understand how that weapon is used. But it's hard to tell when a thrust is coming during an exchange of slashes right?"

Altina said as she gestured.

Eddie nodded.
"But it is hard to aim for the chance to thrust right?"

"Eddie did just that though. And your speed could rival Latreille."

"It's just hard for you to defend. If your weapon is long, keeping your distance is the basics right?"

"Was my reaction slow——?"

"But I can tell that you are aware about my sword movement. Didn't you back away unconsciously when I thrust?"

"I am good at thrust too."

"I know. If it is a distance both weapons can reach, the lighter sword will be faster."

"Ah, I get it now!"

"Hmm?"

"If I can wield 'Grand Tonnerre Quatre' as fast as Eddie and Latreille, I will win!"

"Ahh, you… notice that, are you a genius!?"

Eddie sounded surprised.

Altina puffed her chest out proudly.

Baltasar who was watching them sighed.

Someone walked over the grass and came to them.

The person holding down her maid attire against the wind as she walked over was Clarisse.

“Your Highness ——”

“Ara, Clarisse! Is it time for lunch?”

“Didn’t you just ate lunch?”

“Eeheehee… I got hungry after exercising for a little. Well then, is dinner ready?”

“In three more hours, Your Highness.”

“Why would dinner take three more hours?”

“Because it will be evening in three more hours.”

“I don’t have the patience to wait three hours. Whatever is fine, I’m hungry now. Can I have some tea?”

“… Alright. The letter is here too.”

“Ehh!?”

“Sir Regis sent it.”

“Why didn’t you say that at the very beginning!?”

Altina stood up with a start. Even though her knees were still shaking, she still stood with her fighting spirit alone.

Eddie also stood up with a wry smile.

“Well then, that’s it for today’s training.”

Baltasar nodded too.

“Hey Argentina…”

“What is it?”

“I think that for learning, instead of repeated training, thinking is more important. Knowing the past and predicting the future will allow you to use your skill freely.”

“Yeah.”

“… You understand?”

“Erm, yeah.”

“Don’t look away!”

But despite that, Altina was considering it in her own way. However, Baltasar wasn’t satisfied with that.

Not good at thinking —— That’s not entirely true.

It was because her strategist that could think in her stead wasn’t with her.

Walking down the stairs from the roof of the fortress, they met the soldiers on sentry duty who saluted them.

The grey stony path was illuminated by the orange glow of torches.

Except for the passage towards the outer walls, the fort was cut off from the outside. No matter how sunny it was, the inside would be dark and dim.

That would make the soldiers gloomy, but they weren’t given time to be sullen.

Even though Jerome was absent, Evrard who was familiar with his training methods were around. Abidal Evra and other senior officers had also grown stronger from the previous consecutive battles.

Following their guidance, the soldiers did not rest and went out for

field training every day. Even though the 9,000 troops of the Fort were gathered not long ago, they had become a force to be reckoned with in just half a year.

Also, because the Imperial Fourth Army achieved the most merits in the earlier battles, many soldiers wished to be assigned her. They probably think that —— *If I am going to fight, I might as well serve in a great unit.*

Although Altina felt that it was thanks to Regis and not really due to her own merit, the recruits still complimented her, which dampened her mood…

Anyway, the Fourth Army recovered the numbers they lost in the previous battle in no time, and was steadily increasing.

Someone was walking along the passage.

It wasn't a soldier.

It was a handsome youth with silver hair and crimson eyes, Prince Auguste.

He wore high class clothes of a noble gentleman, and not a military uniform. A royal who had given up his succession right, and is living in seclusion.

—— That was just his public standing though.

Even though he was dressed like a prince, her real identity was his sister Felicia. The real Auguste already died one year ago.

Felicia was impersonating him. Even in Altina's unit, only a selected few knew this grave secret. And of course, this was hidden from the soldiers.

That was why she dressed like the prince inside the Fort. And Eddie protected her as a bodyguard.

"What's the matter, Auguste?"

"Eddie, you are training again… You are spending all your time there."

“Even though the powerful enemy had left, grandfather is still here teaching me.”
Baltasar bowed deeply.

“Thank you for taking care of my useless grandson.”

“N-Not at all… Eddie is a big help. But… Erm… Let him be my opponent occasionally too…”

“As you wish. He has no good points aside from swordsmanship, so please use him as you desire.”

Baltasar nodded.

Eddie smiled wryly.
“Ah, Auguste wants to practice swordsmanship too?”

“Absolutely not!”
Auguste let out an unimaginably cute voice —— that was actually Felicia.

Achoo! Eddie sneezed.

Auguste proffered a white cloth to him.

She must have brought it over intentionally.

“It’s because you are drenched in sweat. I will wipe it for you, erm… Let’s go back to the room.”

“Wait, we are going to talk over tea.”

“Are you going to do it while drenched in sweat? Even if this is the frontlines, do you think such unsightly behaviours are acceptable?”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I will help you wipe, come here.”

“Erm… I will wipe it myself.”

“You are saying that, but you just want to escape right?”

August grabbed Eddie’s arm as if she was hugging him, then led him away.

“No, I won’t run okay?”

“I told you that I would wipe your sweat for you. Just like a horse.”

“Hahaha… But you will be embarrassed when the time actually comes, and can’t exert any strength. It feels ticklish.”

“I-It will be fine today!”

The two of them left gradually as they conversed.

Felicia who always seemed to be deep in thought will become more daring when dressed like a man. Leaving aside the fact that this wasn’t how a prince was supposed to act.

There were rumours among the troops that the relationship between Prince Auguste and Duke Balzac wasn’t that simple. But that was better than them realizing that Auguste was actually Felicia.

Baltasar sighed.

He didn’t know that Felicia was impersonating Auguste. Their relationship must look strange in his eyes.

“… Maybe the House lineage will end with my grandson.”

“But doesn’t it look fine right now?”

Baltasar tilted his head baffled when he heard what Altina said.

Fort Volks, Smithing Workshop——

A cart was filled to the brim, but a strong man managed to pull it with him.
The man with the title of Mercenary King, Band leader of ‘Renard Pendu’, Gilbert Schweinzeberg.

He was working as a manual labourer right now.

Even though he was a mercenary renowned throughout the continent, he had been reduced to a prisoner. He will be hung if he

did not work. Right now, he and his subordinates were doing the work of transporting cargo, cleaning and laying bricks.

Gilbert stopped his cart.

“... Is this good enough?”

It was a heavy voice that could shake the earth. His face could make the enemy he encountered on the battlefield panic in fear.

However, the blacksmith who received him smiled.

“Ohh, it’s finally here! Thank you for your hard work, open the crates immediately.”
“... Got it.”

This was a blacksmith from Rouen City, Enzo Bardot Smith. A man with a bear-like physique.

He didn’t seem intimidated by Gilbert. That wasn’t Gilbert’s intention anyway. After hearing what the blacksmith said, Gilbert started opening the crates he ferried over.

Inside the crates was coal.

But the strange things about them were their lack of luster. Coal should be shinier than this.

“... What are these? The colour seemed different from normal coal.”

“Fufu, you noticed. These are coke[W] delivered from Rouen City.”

Enzo picked up a coke, inspecting the quality of the sensation and colour.

Gilbert asked:

“What is coke?”

“You know that to work with steel, it needs to be heated through a furnace right? That can be done by burning wood, but the temperature won’t be high enough. It is possible to raise the temperature by using coke.”

“It’s different from coal?”

“Ahh, coal won’t do. It can achieve the required temperature, but sulfur will seep out. That would make steel brittle.”

“… Is such fuel used often?”

“Only some of the blacksmith in Belgaria uses them. I heard that their use is widespread in High Britannia. New Steel couldn’t be forged if you don’t burn coke in a furnace.”

“What!? You mean it’s possible to craft New Steel by using this as fuel!?”

“Yeah… But the furnace in this Fort is not good enough. There are only manpowered bellows[W] here. To forge New Steel, a watermill powered bellows would be needed. In that case, I can only do so in a place where one has already been built.”

“… I think that High Britannia’s technology is improving by leaps and bounds… But Belgaria is amazing too. Only the Germanian Federation is behind the times.”

Gilbert sighed.

‘Renard Pendu’ worked for High Britannia not just for their high amount of alluring remuneration —— providing them with New Steel weapons was also a major factor.

The quality of the weapons was directly related to performance on the battlefield. Weapons that were behind the times would only shorten one’s life.

If the Germanian Federation could forge their own New Steel, they wouldn’t need to aid High Britannia.

Enzo tilted his head.

“Is that so? The Germanian Federation might not have New Steel or the new modeled rifles, but they are the first ones to create a furnace. It wasn’t a Federation then though… They are also the ones who invented clothing and buttons.”

“Isn’t that a really long time ago?”

Enzo shrugged in response.

In the past, the people of the north might have invented advanced items.

However, their industrial and agricultural development was now lagging behind others due to a series of minor civil battles.

If the civil battles continued, then the overall strength of the Germanian Federation would continue to plummet. Although that would be heavenly for mercenaries…

If the military superior Belgarian Empire was equipped with the New Steel and rifles of High Britannia, the Federation would fall immediately.

In recent years, the head of the federation, Saint Prussia Kingdom was growing in influence. Their reigning king was the ultimate spendthrift, and was excellent in military affairs.

Talks about how they would become an empire if they kept absorbing neighbouring nations were spreading. It was one of the means to survival.

But the other member country of the Federation won’t sit by idly and wait for their destruction.

Would unification come first, or would destruction consume them before that?

—— I’m just a mercenary, so the future of the Federation doesn’t concern me… No, I am not even a mercenary anymore, I’m just a labourer now.

Gilbert sighed.

Enzo gestured at him in front of the furnace.
“Alright, bring the coke here.”

“Okay…”

Looking up, he could see a mass produced sword used by the

soldiers of Belgaria. However, it has a luster as if it was forged from silver. The leather grip was also a polished work which he had never seen.

Gilbert picked up the sword without a second thought.

It felt perfect.

As if his it was sucked into his hand.
It was a bit light for him, but even though he was holding it for the first time, it put him at ease, as if he had gotten used to using it.

“Hey! What are you doing!”

For an instant, he neglected the looks around him as he was engrossed in the well made sword.

When he realized it, the soldier on sentry had always raised his spear.

Gilbert felt his heart beating fast.

He knew that the guards were wary of him. And he understood what a prisoner holding a sword meant.

—— Stupid! I was so engrossed that I picked it up unwittingly.

Hearing the shout of the soldier on sentry, the other guards started gathering, wondering what happened.

What should he do?

There was just one soldier before him. About five paces away. This was a workshop, the space was cramped because of the work table and tools, fighting here would be constricted.

There were two other guards. They were just looking this way, and not very wary.

But the problem was the shackles on his legs.

There wasn’t any problem with pulling a cart, but it would be a hindrance in wielding a sword. Closing the distance fast was important in using a sword to fight a spear, but the shackles would

get in the way.

—— Let him thrust this way, and hijack his spear?

It was easy for him to grab the spear thrust of a common soldier.

Sweat dripped between his brows.

But what about his subordinates? The men who got injured and were receiving treatment?

They will probably be executed.

The chance of success if he revolt on a whim was very low.

Gilbert looked at the soldier holding the spear.

The thing breaking the tension was——

Enzo's voice:

"What are you doing? Get over here and help me."
"Eh!?"

Gilbert let out a baffled sound unconsciously.

But Enzo didn't seem to mind as he waved his hand.

The sentry shouted:
"That man is a prisoner with the title of mercenary king that need require additional attention! I saw him picking up a sword without permission! That is a revolt!"

Enzo shrugged.

"Ah, yes—… I asked him to do that. Hey, bring that sword here, and the coke too."
The sentry kept his guard up.

"Mister Blacksmith, get away from him! He is dangerous!"

"No matter how strong he is, this fort has an army of 10,000. What can he do with just a sword? The sentries on duty are gathering too. Don't need to worry, right?"

“Hmmm…”

Indeed, it was impossible to revolt and escape the fort with just a sword. Going by common sense, that was to be expected.

Gilbert obeyed the commands, putting the sword on the crate of coke and then pushed the cart.

The sword and coke were brought to the furnace.

Seeing Gilbert put down the sword, the sentry also lower his spear.

The gathered soldiers also returned to their posts as if nothing happened.

—— I’m saved?

There was no reason to bring a finished sword to the furnace. Gilbert, who was misunderstood by the sentry, was saved by the blacksmith.

As he put the coke into the furnace as instructed, he asked quietly:

“... Why did you help me?”
“Well, I understand after seeing your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“After a man who entrusted his life to a weapon saw the sword I forged, his eye sparkled like a child and was completely engrossed.”

It sounded shameful when he was told that… But that was the truth.

Gilbert had indeed been mesmerized by the sword Enzo forged.

“... Ugh, yes.”

He mumbled unintelligibly, then realized he was thanking Enzo.

Enzo smiled.

“But as expected, you are really a famous guy.”

“I don’t remember having such a title…”

“How is the sword I made?”

“... It’s a good sword… But too light for me.”

“Well, that’s true. You use a spear right?”

“... You can tell just by looking?”

“Not really, it’s because of your muscle distribution.”

They talked as they worked, and finally emptied all the coke into the furnace.

“Alright, the fire got stronger. Use the bellows.”

Gilbert grabbed the handles of the bellows after hearing that, pressing and pulling it to send air into the furnace.

“You are pretty good. Much stronger than my apprentice.”
“... I have never lost in a competition of strength before.”

“Great, keep it up, I’m counting on you.”

Although transporting coke and using the bellows were usually the jobs of apprentices, all the blacksmiths had to forge weapons because of the great influx in the number of soldiers.

In the end, laborious jobs such as ferrying goods that only required strength was tasked to others.

Gilbert thought it would be boring and monotonous work, but sending enough air to keep the fire burning at a certain level required more concentration than expected.

And the furnace hot enough to burn steel bright red was right in front of him. He was sweating profusely in no time.

The blacksmith heated the steel up, then hammered it.

After hammering, it was heated up again.

There were blacksmiths in ‘Renard Pendu’ too, but the difference in quality could be seen immediately.

Gilbert assisted Enzo as instructed.

They continued working and seemed to neglect the time.

From that day, Gilbert was called to assist the blacksmiths more often.

After separating from Baltasar, Altina returned to her own chambers.

A moment later, Clarisse came over with tea and brioche.

Eric arrived too.

He was a youth about Altina's age with blonde hair. He just celebrated his 17th birthday recently.

Eric was Altina's Escort Officer.

However, he was injured in the opening battle of the war earlier, and the symptom from his wounds still lingered.

He couldn't exert strength in his left hand.

It wasn't a problem for his daily life, but he doesn't have the wrist power to lift a large shield or pull the reins of a horse anymore.

Knights would hold a weapon in their right hand and the reins in their left during battles. There were times they need to switch hands too. If they couldn't use one arm, they would not be able to serve as a knight.

Eric was being treated as a casualty right now.

Altina let him sit in her chair.

It was a high quality white slender chair.

It had been less than half a year since Fort Volks was taken as a base, but the room was becoming extravagant because of the many gifts from nobles and merchants.

There were bright coloured cloth, laces and flower vases decorating the room.

It wasn’t adorned with sparkling gems and precious metals like the Imperial Capital, but compared to the time it was used by Varden Grand Duchy of the Germanian Federation, the difference was staggering.

The people of the Germanian Federation believed that simplicity was beauty, and that unnecessary things should be removed. Decorating the room was shameful to them.

Altina also dislike meaningless extravagance.

However, she thinks that adequate decoration could improve one’s mood. Humans can’t survive on bread alone.

Clarisse placed the tea set on the luxurious round table which was sitting on a tile by the side.

“These are new tea leaves from the capital. Maybe the sea trade have resumed.”

“Probably.”

The Belgarian Empire had captured the newest model of warship from High Britannia. When words about this spread, the pirates targeting the transport vessels no longer dare to linger near their coast.

Even though they were pirates, their real identity was the Hispania Imperial Navy. They would hang pirate flags in place of their naval colours, and commit piracy as a nation.

Their public stance was that they had nothing to do with pirates, but the vessels and weapons used by the pirates were all made by Hispania, and the crew were mostly Hispanians. So it was impossible for them to be entirely uninvolved.

And of course, relations between the two nations were deteriorating fast.

If High Britannia didn’t invade, Belgaria might have launched a punitive force against the Hispania Empire to the southwest.

Altina picked up her white porcelain teacup. The light red liquid

emitted a soothing fragrance.

Clarisse and Eric also sat down, the three of them gathered around the round table.

Normally, the maid and Escort Officer can't sit opposite the commander like this. They should be standing at the wall or near the entrance.

However, other soldiers won't see if they are in Altina's room. There wasn't a need to show their hierarchical relationship, so Altina treated the two of them as friends.

Clarisse took out the letter.

"Alright, this is the letter that was received today, together with this crate. What do you think?"

There was a crate near the door. It was big enough to fit in a large sword.

Hufufu~ Clarisse laughed.

"Could it be a present for the Princess~ … Maybe it is?"

"Well, even if that's true, wouldn't it be filled with books?"

Altina shrugged.

Eric looked troubled, but didn't refute that.

Clarisse breathed in.

"You know Sir Regis that well huh. Well then, I will read the letter."

She broke the wax seal and opened the envelope.
The three of them looked at the letter laid out on the table.

"Sir Regis has a way with words as usual… Well… 'To Altina. The weather is fine in the capital today'"

"Clarisse wait!? Why are you reading this out loud!?"

"Ara? I am confident in imitating his voice."

“I don’t need you to mimic his speaking style, don’t do unnecessary things.”
“Alright… ‘To my cute Altina. The days that I couldn’t meet you is so unbearable.’”

“He didn’t write that!”

“Creativity is necessary.”

“You don’t need creativity to read the letter!”

The bickering between Altina and Clarisse made Eric smile.

After knowing about his injuries, he didn’t smile much. That’s why I called him here to cheer him up a little —— Altina thought.

Eric might be an Escort Officer, but he wasn’t just protecting Altina’s safety, he also supported her when she was down and troubled. Even his injuries was because he protected Regis.
He was an important companion.

In the first letter she wrote to Regis, Altina told him about Eric’s condition.

Fort Volks was rather far away from the capital, so the letter would take several days to reach. That’s why the letters from Regis was about report about his recent situation.

When she found out that Regis became Latreille's strategist —— to be honest, Altina cried. Even though she could suppress her urge in the beginning, her heart was already a mess.

She still found it hard to accept, but she still calmed down.

She believed that Regis would send her letters every day.

And as time passes, she think the first letter she would receive a reply for the first letter she sent soon.

As usual, the beginning of the letter was a report of recent events.

He will be moving out from the capital in a few days, and head in the direction of Langobalt Kingdom.

Since the letter was mailed out a week ago, he should have set off by now, and was in the middle of his campaign.

As he was a strategist of the Imperial First Army, and it was a fort battle, he probably won't face the enemy directly.

Even so, the letter still calmed down Altina a little.

The second letter was for Eric.

Regis' words were as follows:

I understand the gist of the issue, this is a serious problem. I have often read about the lingering effects of wounds in stories. There are many records of people recovering from it, so don't give up too easily. However, there is no telling how many years it would take.

Eric seemed to have heard the same thing from the lady doctor.

"As expected, I can't recover immediately…"

He sighed.

And continued reading

It must be difficult to fight on horseback. Even though it is not mandatory for Escort Officers to ride horses, placing someone who couldn't ride in an important post would affect the morale of the entire army. Even if we convince the troops to accept it, Eric might not be comfortable with that.

I see, Altina nodded.

She received special treatment since she was born. Others were jealous as far as her memory goes. And despite never attending Military Academy, she was suddenly appointed as a commander.

And so, there were times when she found it hard to understand the feelings of normal people.

Especially the desire to make it big.

Altina wanted to be Empress because this was the necessary path to bring about change to the Empire.

She had never thought about the necessity of ranks and career progression.
However, in reality, the soldiers were working for all sorts of reasons.

She had to avoid showing bias to Eric and grant him that post. If Eric's receive treatment that didn't correspond with his capability, the soldiers would lose their will to work hard.

She read on.

Before Eric's left hand fully recovers, it will be better to transfer him away from the post of Escort Officer.

"… I knew it… There is no other way."
Eric slumped his shoulders.

Altina pointed to the letter.

"Wait, there's more."

But considering how he feels, I have a proposal if he still wants to serve in the army. It has never been done in the Belgarian Army before, but I think this will be the main class of soldiers in the near future. I hope he can be the pioneer to familiarize with this, and become an instructor.

"Ehh?"

Eric leaned forward.

He stared at the letter as if he was going to eat it.

I want Eric to be the first ‘Riflemen’ in the Empire. I have sent the necessary items, please open the crate and take a look.

Eric squatted beside the crate and tried opening the lid. But he couldn’t exert strength in his left hand, so it was hard for him to do so.

As this was a crate for military transportation, there wasn’t any handles on the cover. The lid was nailed down.

Altina squatted beside him to help.

“Leave this to me.”
“H-How could I let the Princess do such a thing…!!”

“It’s fine, I have a lot of strength.”

She grabbed the lid and pull up, and the sound of nails being pulled out could be heard. She crushed the lid, but it was a disposable item so it’s fine. It could be used as firewood.

“Arara…”

Clarisse who had a wrench in hand shrugged. If she prepared that before hand, Altina really wished she could have taken it out at the very beginning.

The thing inside the crate was rod shaped, covered in cloth and emitting a pungent oily smell.

If they didn’t read the letter, they would have mistaken this for a sword.

Eric carefully unravelled the cloth.

And gulped.

This was a High Britannia made breech loaded rifle.

There was some ammunition too.

These are three rifles that were captured in good shape, I will send it to you first. Firstly, there are about a hundred bullets, I will send more if you finished them. Even though these are only made in High

Britannia for now, the Empire would one day manufacture rifles and bullets of the same standard. Prince Latreille is passionate about research and development. In the near future —— the weapons ruling the battlefield won't be swords or pikes, but rifles. We are urgently in need of talents who are proficient in using it. I pray that Eric will give this deep thought and face this task seriously.

Next was detailed instructions on the usage and maintenance of the rifles.

As expected of Regis, it was full of details about places to take note, Altina didn't think she could do this.

"… The main weapon of the battlefield huh."

In the earlier battles, Altina couldn't do anything about the power of the rifles.

But thanks to Regis' strategy, the Belgarian Empire still emerged victorious.

However, it was not that simple for Altina who spend every day practicing her sword to accept this.

What about Eric? He probably suffered rigorous training since childhood to learn such excellent swordsmanship.

Could he accept it if he was asked to use a rifle all of a sudden?

"Eric, don't force yourself okay?"

"… Yes, erm… I am not pushing myself… just a little surprised. I thought the likes of muskets were just used to intimidate others. How could it rule the battlefield… Ah, I know that Sir Regis only proposed this after careful consideration."

Belgaria's musket required tedious preparation, and lack firepower.

As Eric had never seen the way High Britannia fought, he couldn't understand that.

Altina told him about the battle of Lafressange.

It was a battle that dealt a destructive blow to the Imperial Seventh

Army. The weapon used by High Britannia in that battle, was the rifle in front of them.

“I don’t know how good the rifles made by Belgaria will be, or if rifles will really rule the battlefield… But Sir Regis thinks that war will change because of this.”

Eric listened with a serious face.

“... I see… I also heard that the High Britannia Army dealt heavy casualties to us with rifles, but I didn’t imagine it to be this one sided.”

“If we knew, we would have thought of a better plan.”

He pondered deeply.
“That’s true, I… Maybe that’s the only option I have… But giving up the sword… Is not such an easy decision to make.”

“How about training both at the same time?”

“...The expectation Regis have of me is not just being a rifleman. But to be the instructor of the new model rifles… Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true.”

“If my training is half hearted, I won’t be skilled enough to teach others.”

“Hmm… Is that so?”

The Belgaria Empire also had front loaded muskets. It wasn’t used much, but there should be people who were familiar with it.

They were rookies and farmers who couldn’t do well even if they held pikes, so they were issued muskets.

The star of the battlefield was the cavalry. Followed by pikemen and archers. Artillery and musket men were looked down on.

There were commanders who thought it would be better for them to transport cargo than to push their cannons and muskets.

Hence, there were no ‘riflemen’ in Belgaria. Only High Britannia used

that term.

Eric muttered.

“… I was defeated… by the mercenary from ‘Renard Pendu’, the person with a crossbow.”

“You still remember huh.”
Altina didn’t forget the name Franziska either. What happened that night was still fresh on her mind.

She was toyed by her and fell to a big disadvantage. Eric who came to support her was hit, Altina let this get to her head, and cleaved Grand Tonnerre Quatre into a tree and damaged it.

—— I lost that fight.

In the earlier battle, it was thanks to Regis’ tactic that they caught the band leader of ‘Renard Pendu’, Gilbert. However, they let his sister Franziska escaped.

Where is she now?

She was a mercenary from the Germanian Federation, did she return there? Or was she on the way to Fort Volks to rescue her brother?

To Eric, Franziska was an unforgettable existence too.

“… That mercenary could fight with a crossbow no matter how close you get to her. If I can’t be like her, I won’t be able to take the post of instructor. Since Regis said that rifles will rule the battlefield, he probably isn’t referring to fighting with a blade attached to the front of the rifle.”

“You are right, if a sword is combined with a rifle, it would become a spear.”

It was tedious to reload Belgaria’s muskets, so after firing the first shot, they would fix a blade to the tip of the musket and wield it like a spear. That blade was known as a bayonet.

“Of course, I think it is only natural for soldiers to use swords… I

think his expectation of me is to use the rifle to fight by firing shots."

"It's not good to give up halfway."

"If we use it like spears after firing off the shots, it would be no different from what we are doing with the muskets anyway."

It was hard to imagine doing it that way would make it the king of the battlefield.

However, war had always been fought with swords and pikes, could rifle really play a major role?

Eric stared at the pieces of metal inside the crate.
"... I..."

"Hmm?"

"I will choose to believe Sir Regis."

"Eric, is that really fine?"

"... I don't know if this will be of help to Your Highness... But I will do all that I can to learn how to use this new rifles."

He picked up a rifle from the crate.

Altina nodded.

"I understand, Eric. No matter what weapons you use, I will trust you."

"... Princess... I am honoured. I will give everything I have to protect Your Highness."

This day, at this place, the first 'rifleman' of the Belgarian Empire was born.
Because of several coincidence happening at the same time, it had a large influence on the rifle becoming mainstream in the Empire.

Although High Britannia's new rifles achieved great results, they lost in the end, making the other nations cautious about implementing the usage of rifles.

However, rifles were evaluated differently in the Empire.

That was because, even though Altina herself wasn't aware, her every action as a saviour of the Empire were watched by the troops and nobles closely.

And she assigned a rifleman to be her Escort Officer.

The new rifle became 'the honorable weapon that protect the princess', and everyone with high status held high expectation of it.

But pushing the widespread usage of new rifles earlier than the other nations resulted in a colossal change to the fate of the Belgarian Empire.

Chapter 3 - Late Night Coffee

The windows were rattling in the wind this night.

In the hills 5 Li (22 km) from Grebauvar city, the early summer vegetation inside the forest was thick and obstructed vision. It gave

the feeling that the mythical residents of the forest might show up at any time. They communicated with fairies of the earth, fire, wind and water, and lived with the elfs.

In the forest where the moonlight couldn't shine through, thoughts about the existence of such beings started springing forth.

There was a well paved road that connected the Imperial Capital to Grebauvar city.

That's why if the First Army set up their formation along this road and placed their headquarters in the clearance, they would be spotted easily by the enemy scouts.

If the enemy discovered the location of the headquarters, there would be a risk of a surprise attack, so they set up their headquarters in the forest.

Even though the enemy was fighting an away battle, they launched a successful attack on the First Army's headquarters before, so they couldn't let their guard down.

And of course, Regis was using a tentage of a normal senior officer. Floorings were placed over the wet mud, and a foldable table, a chair and a bed were set up before surrounding it with canvas.

Most soldiers just laid a piece of cloth onto the ground and slept on it. It would be great if they had a sheet to cover themselves too.

If the number of officers afforded the privilege of a personal tent increased by one, they would need to add a hundred men on transport and management, since the men transporting the items needed food supplies too.

By the way, there was no roof for such canvas, so one would be drenched if it rained.

It rarely rains in north Belgaria, and the rain would let up fairly quickly even if it did. The air was dry and even if the men were drenched, they would dry up in no time. Therefore, the army didn't go to the trouble to protect themselves from the rain, and only did so for the tent of the commander Latreille.

If they set up camp in a wide space like the plains, they would prepare tents that were as big as a home like what the Fourth Army did. It would be more comfortable, but it couldn't be used in the forest.

The campsite was decided by the commander beforehand, so they only brought the necessities to the battlefield.

The curtain covering the entrance to the tent shook quietly.

Regis raised his head from his book.

"Who is it?"

"Sir Regis, it's me."

"Ahhh, please come in."

"Sorry for intruding at this hour."

The one who opened the curtain and entered was Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde.

Her long black hair reached all the way down to the sash around the waist of her black one piece dress.

She was an aristocratic lady who didn't suit the battlefield, but was dispatched to follow this expedition by the Ministry of Military Affairs under the pretext of Regis' Escort Officer.

Originally, she should only keep watch over him during his time in the Imperial Capital, but for some reason, she volunteered to travel with the army.

She carried in a tray with freshly baked bread and coffee.

"... Sir Regis, you are staying up late tonight too. This might be nosy of me, but I brought some supper."

"No, it smells fragrant, I am thankful."

"It's my pleasure."

Regis placed the document on the table back into the crate. The

crate had two layers, a contraption to prevent the documents from getting wet in the rain.

Fanrine placed the tray onto the table.

Not just bread, there were tangerines, peaches and dark coffee in a wooden cup.

Regis picked up the coffee and took a sip. The hot liquid warmed his body and drove away his fatigue.

“It’s delicious.”

“Fufu… That’s great.”

“Fanrine, do you prepare your own supper at night?”

“I usually don’t do that… But don’t all women want to prepare supper for their husband personally?”

“It’s rare to see an aristocratic lady doing that. Working earnestly in everything you do is a wonderful idea.”

“... Thank you. Sir Regis is reading today too.”
“Yes, after becoming a staff officer of the First Army, I now have the rights to read documents I couldn’t read in the past. I have to use this chance to look through them.”

Regis reached for the bread. Even though the bread baked at the battlefield was very hard, there was butter on it so it was tasty. What a luxury to eat butter on the battlefield.

“Ms Fanrine won’t tell me to sleep early though. Everyone ask me to do that when they see me reading through the night.”

Fanrine smiled under the faint light of the lamp.

The wavering shadows emphasized the contours of her body, which made her more charming than in the day.

“Because everyone is worried about Sir Regis’ health.”

“Yes, I understand that. Thank you.”

“I hope Sir Regis can stay in good health too, but there are some things that have to be done which I can’t do in your stead. I don’t want to get in your way.”

“... I see.”

That’s a different way of thinking about this, Regis thought.

She wasn’t just a gentle woman, Fanrine had given it much thought.

The tangerine was deliciously sweet and sour.

“Aren’t you eating, Ms Fanrine?”

“I will be turning in soon. Sir Regis, have you gotten acquainted with everyone from the First Army?”

“Well, I think my relationship with them isn’t bad… On the surface.”

“That’s good enough. I was worried during the conversation earlier.”

“... The men from the White Wolves Knights are probably not too happy.”

“That skirmish near the Imperial Capital is quite well known, there are sons from noble Houses amongst the knights of the First Army.”

The commander and his deputy both died during that incident.

Regis didn’t want anyone to die, but Jerome’s five hundred Black Knights were facing off against the thousand strong White Wolves Knights, any wrong move and they would have been wiped out. So Regis couldn’t hold back.

Right now, the Knight Commander of the White Wolves was newly promoted, and didn't bear any grudge against Regis.

But there were definitely people who still did because of that battle, so Regis couldn't let his guard down.

"For now, I am here as a staff officer on Prince Latreille's invitation… Compared to their hatred towards me, their loyalty is probably stronger."
Regis didn't know any commander who was held in a higher regard by their subordinates than Latreille.

"Prince Latreille is going to be the Emperor right?"

"Probably. When the war with High Britannia ends… Well, I think this battle will end this war. That's why we are going to lay siege on the fort city."

"... Why are you doing that?"

Fanrine was capable and excellent in politics, but was lacking in military affairs.

Regis explained as he chewed on his bread.

"When attacking a fort, the battle will end when our soldiers break into their fort. There won't be many soldiers escaping from inside. Without sufficient numbers, they would be like bandits, no matter who was in command. There wouldn't be a problem in declaring the war has ended then."

"I see, so we will definitely win?"

"Well… For the defenders of a fort, they would win when they drastically reduce the attacker's numbers, and pursue after them during their retreat."

Or to hold out until reinforcement arrives.

There won't be reinforcement from High Britannia coming, but if the war becomes a stalemate, the neighbouring nations would attack the Belgarian Empire.

“I heard that the fort city is really well built.”

“Yes, Grebauvar city has an excellent fort. It is hard to imagine how it fell into the hands of the enemy.”

“So they haven’t found out yet.”

“No… They’ve already learned the situation from those who escaped… But they are treating me like an outsider and haven’t told me the details.”
“That’s rude.”

“I have no choice but to ask about it during tomorrow’s war conference. This is the first time I am in the position of receiving report that had already been organized, but as a newcomer, I have to be used to the new way of doing things.”

Regis didn’t want them to accommodate him so much that they get into conflicts.

He was just feeling uneasy.

Fanrine asked other things.

“… Sir Regis supports Princess Argentina to be the Empress right? Is it fine to help Prince Latreille like this?”

“Well, saving the citizens of Grebauvar City is the priority, and we need to end the war with High Britannia as soon as possible. If we stand idly by, our neighbouring nations would invade. These facts must be considered separately from politics.”

“That’s true.”

“And I am wondering whether Prince Latreille and Princess Argentina’s policy are really too irreconcilable -- I need to know the answer to this. The goal isn’t to obtain authority, but to change the governance policies of the Belgarian Empire. It would be great if we can shift from Hegemonism to Pacifism.”

“Isn’t it obvious that Prince Latreille is hegemonic?”

“He was in the past. But with the Empire suffering heavy losses in

the war with High Britannia, and the war changing with the debut of rifles, it would be a different era. The Prince's thinking might change. I have some hope for that…"

"If nothing changes, then what would you do?"

"Hmm… That's a difficult question. If Prince Latreille insists on hegemonism to expand his territory, I would need to take countermeasures. However, he would be Emperor then."

If the campaign to recapture Grebauvar City was successful, Prince Latreille would probably become Emperor.

Regis sighed.

"If he takes the throne, it will be difficult no matter what I do…"

Fanrine tilted her head in surprise.
"Speaking of which, Princess Argentina would lose her succession rights if Prince Latreille takes the throne right?"

"That's right, there isn't any law regarding the succession of the throne, but it had always followed tradition. The most influential person with regards to this is the Chamberlain. He is of noble birth, and was the Minister of Military Affairs as well as the Ceremonial Ministry in the past. He seemed to have strong ties to the current Ministers. If the Chamberlain doesn't acknowledge him, the powerful grand nobles wouldn't either. This means there is a form of senate in the Empire, even though it is not recognized by law."

"It feels strange that the succession of the Emperor, the one with absolute authority in the Empire, is decided by the Chamberlain."

Fanrine lowered her voice. She was already speaking softly, and was even more guarded now.
She was baffled by it, and Regis felt the same.

"It's because the previous Emperor granted him a lot of authority, but the problem is the sudden empowerment. Well, no matter what… If the second son succeeds the throne, the fourth daughter losing her succession right is the tradition――"

“That’s right.”

“The Belgarian Empire is special, but in nations like High Britannia, Hispania and Germania, siblings would have succession rights if the Emperor has no scion, something like this——”

Regis wrote on a piece of scrap paper.

Emperor’s descendants ⇒ Emperor’s younger brother ⇒ Brother’s descendant ⇒ Even younger brother ⇒ His descendants…

“However, the Belgarian Empire doesn’t recognize the succession rights of the Emperor’s siblings.”

Emperor’s descendants ⇒ Emperor’s younger sibling’s descendants ⇒ Even younger sibling’s descendants

“The reason for this is probably an assassination plot that almost destroyed the Empire. In summary, it solves the problem of royal fratricide.”

“Is this problem because of the royals… personality?”

“Yes. Not all of them are like this, but the royals have the prowess to fight a thousand men, and formidable mental fortitude. But this might lead to events developing in a terrible way.”

Regis recounted a tale that happened not too long ago.

The records were vague, and historians all held different opinions on this story——

About 500 years ago, when the Empire was still in the west, the land to the central, south and east still belonged to other nations.

There were three princes about the same age.

They all had crimson eyes, vermillion hair and a well built body, and all three were said to be ‘just like the founding Emperor’.

It was hard to determine who did better on the battlefield as they all performed outstandingly, contributing greatly to expanding the territory of the Empire.

They were the ones who chased the people of a different tribe that were near the current Imperial Capital towards the east. Everyone thought that no matter who became Emperor, the Belgarian Empire would be as sturdy as bedrock.

When the Emperor at that time passed away due to illness, the eldest brother rightfully took the throne, and was in the position to command his brothers.

However, when there were problems, there would be different opinions.

Regarding the counter attack of the foreign tribe they chased away and famine brought about by natural disaster, the Emperor had a clash of views with his brothers.

And then, the assassination happened.

The Second Prince assassinated the Emperor—— that was one of the rumours, but there wasn't any evidence. Despite the doubts surrounding his death, the Second Prince took the throne in accordance to the line of succession. It had just been half a year since his brother ascended the throne.

And of course, the Empire was stable since the Second Prince was an exemplary talent.

Half a year later——

The Third Prince unveiled the treasonous plot of the Second Prince.

The details weren't clear. The common belief was that someone related to the assassination was captured.

There wasn't any law to incriminate a royal.

The court of law could step in, but at this point, it was 'too late for anyone to stop him'. And so, the Third Prince executed the Second Prince.

It wouldn’t be too bad if the story ended here.

However, some of the noble pointed out that instead of the Third Prince, the children of the Second Prince were more suitable for the throne.

When the Second Prince died, his children had priority in the line of succession.

But the coronation of the Second Prince who killed the Emperor was invalid—— There was such a tradition too. The Third Prince insisted that he should have the succession right as the one who unveiled the assassination plot of the First Prince.

But the influence of the Third Prince was too limited, and couldn’t shut the mouths of the Second Prince faction.

The result was a civil war that splitted the nation in two.

According to present day research, the Third Prince’s position was correct in accordance to custom. But unfortunately, the Second Prince faction obtained victory in the end.

There were many stories about what happened to the Third Prince, such as dying on the battlefield, or founding his own nation and passing of old age after escaping from the Empire.

In conclusion, the Belgarian Empire lost three excellent leaders.

During the large scale war, many problems were ignored. Many citizens died from the foreign tribe’s counter attack and famine.

Luckily, the new Emperor was young but talented, and the Empire recovered its national strength… But there was no doubt that the Empire was on the verge of destruction.

And so, the eldest son of the Second Prince who assassinated the First Prince became the new Emperor.

And the descendants of the royal family also inherited this personality.

So to avoid such a failure from happening again, there was a custom

that ‘the siblings must support the new Emperor’—— this was written in many books.

Regis finished the coffee that had gone slightly cold.

“... I don’t think bloodline can decide everything. But after talking about this story of brothers killing brothers, I suspect that this is the reason behind the succession system in place.”

“So that’s where the custom came from.”

“Well, the children of the Emperor would have priority in the line of succession over his brothers. This is the same for other countries.”

“Ah, this might be rude… But if Prince Latreille became Emperor and doesn’t have any children after ascending the throne, than what will happen if he passes away? Will Princess Argentina’s child take the throne?”

“Hmmm… If Prince Auguste has a child, that child would be next in the line of succession. If the throne is vacant for a time, there would be times when the mother of the Emperor would perform his duty as a stand in. Right now, that would be Prince Latreille’s mother—— Her Majesty, the Empress.”

“His mother!?”

“Not taking the throne, but standing in for him.”

“So there is such a thing…”

“The Empire right now is a huge nation with over a million people, but the population was smaller three hundred years ago. As we are constantly at war, the princes and emperors might lose their live if they are not careful. When a child related to the royal family by blood was born, he would become the Emperor.”

“The bloodline actually continued.”

“Yes… If the children have red eyes and hair, they must be a

descendant of the Founding Emperor."

Hmm—— Fanrine pondered.

"Ah… Then for High Britannia, if Queen Margaret loses this war, her sister will become queen?"

"Eh, that kingdom is governed by a parliament, so the succession rights are listed out plainly. According to your logic, wouldn't her cousin Elizabeth be next in line? She doesn't have any sisters after all… No, High Britannia's parliament has the authority to dispose of the monarch. Considering their relations with Belgaria from now on, there is a chance that Queen Margaret would be disposed, even if she survives."

"There will be changes. What kind of person is Princess Elizabeth? It would be great if she hates war…"

"She had never appeared in a public setting before. As she is just 16, she is not considered an adult in High Britannia."

"Is that so?"
"No matter who becomes the queen, that country will be in trouble. Belgaria would ask for war reparations. To satisfy the terms of a peace treaty, would they pay with money, or supply advanced technology…? If they refuse, will it be war? I am against an invasion… But I don't know what Prince Latreille's plans are."

Fanrine nodded.

"Sir Regis, you are concerned about what His Highness' decision would be?"
"Ah… That's right… I hope that Prince Latreille would seek out peaceful diplomatic relations, but…"

"If Prince Latreille implements a hegemonic policy after taking the throne, what would your plans be?"

The orange flames danced in the reflection of her eyes.

Regis could only sit idly by and wait for this situation to come.

He couldn't prevent Latreille from taking the throne.

If Latreille became the new Emperor, and expanded the frontlines…?

“If it comes to that, I… will do all I can. I won’t stand by idly anymore. My apologies, but I can’t explain the specifics.”

“… No, pardon me, a mere woman enquiring on politics.”
“After talking to you, my thoughts are more organized, Ms Fanrine. Thank you.”

“Fufu… sorry to disturb your reading. I will be retiring for the night. See you tomorrow, Sir Regis.”

“Ahhh, good night.”
Fanrine bowed deeply and exited the tent.

Regis sighed.

—— Maybe I will be recreating the struggles between siblings 500 years ago.

This would be a brutal incident in the history of Belgaria.

500 years later, maybe the history books would portray him as a big sinner.

“… I hope… It won’t come to war.”

He didn’t want to see a fight between siblings.

It would be great if he doesn’t have to be a strategist again. He wanted to read his books while being lectured as a ‘useless bum’. That’s what Regis thought.

Imperial Year 851, July 5th

Noon.

The First Imperial Army of the Belgarian Empire advanced to a position 60 Ar (4287m) away from Grebauvar City, which was being

occupied by the allied army of High Britannia and Langobalt Kingdom.

They were not in artillery range, but they could already look over the hill at the grey fortress walls on top of the green plains

If one possessed extraordinary eyesight, they might be able to see the flags of High Britannia and Langobalt clearly.

Just like the intel report stated, the fortress had been seized.

After eating lunch, Regis walked towards the headquarters.

All the soldiers of the First Army were well trained, and weren't uncouth in any way. They maintained their discipline, and didn't look like they had marched for several days. There wasn't anyone wandering around half naked, gambling or fighting.

There were those doing weapon maintenance, training and resting…

Their morale was high.
When Regis clashed with them at the Imperial Capital, he felt they were aloof and careless.

However, they suffered heavy losses in the battle with High Britannia several days ago, he could feel they were tense in a good sense.

He entered the war conference room. It was a round tent with a roof, with a round table inside.

But no chairs.

It seemed that everyone will stand during the conference.

Regis wanted to enter during the appointed time——

But only found one person in there.

It was Latreille who was wearing light armour.

Regis took out his pocket watch panickingly.

"S-Sorry, did I mix up the time?!"

"No, the time now is 5 minutes before 1300 hours… There's no

problem at all.”

“The others aren’t here yet…?”
“Yes, I told the others that the conference will start at 1400 hours.”
This wasn’t the same as usual.

Regis felt uneasy, being in the same tent as Latreille alone.

Maybe he offended him somehow, and would be executed?

No, considering how he had been since he started working here, he might be chased back to the capital because of how useless he was.

Thinking back, Regis noted that he had just been reading books.

Would it be execution or being expelled from the Staff Officers…?
Latreille placed a hand on the table.

“Sir Regis, you are not gelling well with the unit.”

“So I’m fired?”

“Hmm?”

“Ah, no, ehh… Did my work performance not meet your expectations?”
“To be honest, yes. On Le Lucé hill, you advised to not dwell there. But you are not participating in the recent meetings.”

“… Well… I don’t have any special opinions to raise, and didn’t want to drag the process.”

“I think you are concerned about troubling the people around you.”

“My apologies for making you worry.”
“And so, before the conference begins, I would like to hear your views.”

“… Yes.”

“Look at this first.”

A map was laid out on the table.

The smell of ink was still fresh.

It was probably updated with the latest intel.

The fortress city Grebauvar was situated in front of a steep mountain, and built at its valley. Even though it was called a valley, but the land to its side wasn't steep, although there were slopes not easily traversable by carriages. The city was situated in a basin between mountains.

Thanks to the location, the windmills and watermills were always turning.

The wind would blow from the south west towards north east.

It was the same for the river flow. The river was almost wide enough for warships, and was very deep. The river flows across the Germanian Federation all the way to the western sea.

Because the flow was rapid, only those who excel in swimming could make it to the other side.

It seldom rains in Belgaria, so the quantity of water was precious.
It wasn't just a fortress which defends against Langobalt Kingdom of the Germanian Federation, the industries that made full use of the water supply was also a feature of this city.

Along with Mauldre City on the other side of the southern mountain, it was one of the few paper and steel mass production cities within the Empire. It also produced top grade wine.

This was the hub of the northern frontlines, where Lieutenant General Buxlow and his Third Army were garrisoned.

But Lieutenant General Buxlow died in the war with High Britannia.

The Third Army also lost more than half of their forces.

Despite that, there should be more than 10,000 men who have been guarding the city. They were either captured or killed with the fall of the city, and couldn't be counted on to fight.

Hmm… Regis stared at the map.

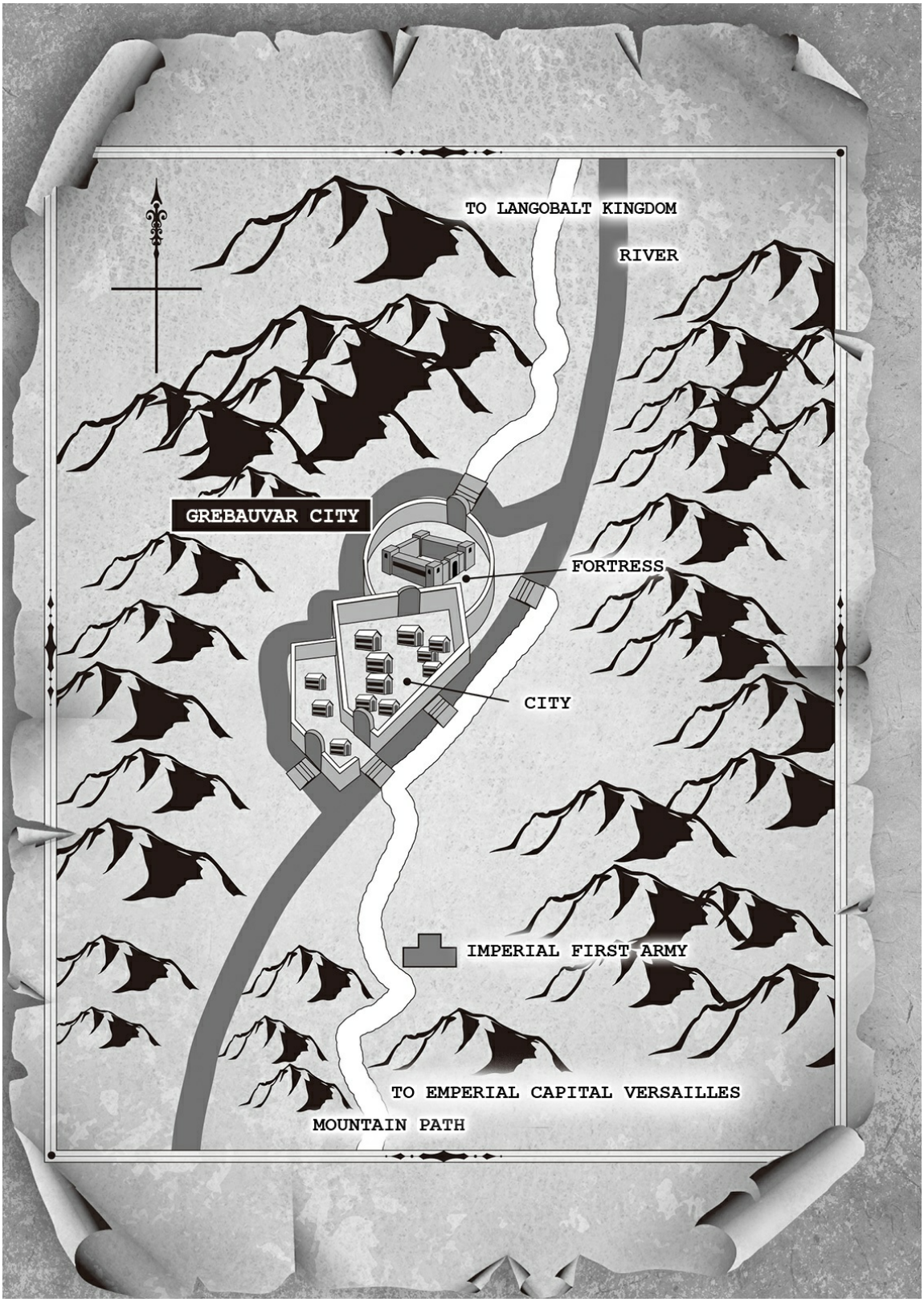
Latreille pointed to the map, and explained the deployment of the enemy.

“According to scouts report, the allied forces of High Britannia and Langobalt Kingdom are inside the fortress, their estimated numbers are between 30,000 to 40,000.”

“Attacking the fortress with inferior numbers, this is a harsh situation.”

“We won’t be fighting them head on. That’s why I requested for your presence.”

“No… that’s…”



Regis broke out in cold sweat.

But it wouldn’t help to say anything now, magic that could undo all disadvantages doesn’t exist. He had pondered and prepared himself,

but there was no telling if it was any use.

Latreille closed his left eye, and stared with his right.

“Didn’t we bring 50,000 pioneers with us because of this?”

“Yes, that’s true… the terrain is just like the intel, I think it will work.”

Pioneers weren’t soldiers.

They were workers gathered from around the capital, more than half of them were refugees who lost their homes, land and wealth because of this war.

They would receive remuneration if they took part in this expedition, a sum that would tide over them and their families for some time.

Families who could not perform labour would need some other form of financial assistance.

Anyway, this was part of a disaster relief program for those affected by the war.

Regis pointed to the map.

“Are the citizens of Grebauvar congregated here?”

It was the southern part of the fortress, where the city part of the place lies. In contrast to the circular walls of the fortress, the walls here were straight.

It was better for city walls to be round, that’s why it was built that way.

If there were corners, it would be attacked from two sides.

However, the circular shape wasn’t suitable for the walls of a city. Thus, aside from the circular walls around the fortress, the city part of it was built in a straight line.

There was also an expansion to the west of the city, which was built during the boom of steel production, housing all buildings related to the steel industry.

Latreille pointed to the expansion part.

“According to those who escaped from the city, the citizens are being held in the steel production street. The soldiers are residing in the main city.”

“People who escaped!?”
“Yes.”

“Is there a secret tunnel?”

“No… The workers ordered to repair the walls jumped into the river suddenly, and escaped by swimming.”

“That river!? He must be an excellent swimmer!”

“Well, other people can’t mimic him. I wonder how many amongst the First Army, which is known as the gathering of the elites could do that…”

“There must be some right?”

“Of course.”

It was a unit where the best of the Empire congregated.”

“What about the holding place of the prisoners?”

“They are not with the civilians, and are still in the main city…”

“Normally thinking, they should be in the city.”

“Probably.”

If the fortress didn’t fall, it would not be considered a loss. If something went wrong and the captives revolt, it wouldn’t be too much of a problem if they were separated by a wall. There was also the problem of size.

Since 30,000 troops were garrisoned in Grebauvar City for the long term, the enemy would take up all the housing space by themselves.

There wouldn’t be enough stoves and wells.

So there was a high chance that the prisoners were held in some

part of the city.

“... Assuming that they are still alive.”

Latreille mumbled to himself, and Regis nodded grimly.

This was war.

The enemy held the lives of captured soldiers in their hand.

Regis asked:

“Do you know the details of how Grebauvar City fell?”
“Yes, some soldiers escaped during the battle.”

Latreille recounted the tale of how Grebauvar City was captured.

Imperial Year 851, June 11th.

Evening.

The watch sentry on duty discovered a unit coming from the south, where the Belgaria Empire lies.

They couldn’t tell the details because it was dark, but the flag was a golden sun over a crimson background.

It was the flag of the Imperial Third Army, the same one that was flying in Grebauvar City.

That meant their allies from the Third Army were coming.

“It’s General Buxlow!”

The watch sentry shouted.

Someone else pointed out.

“Pursuers!”

From the mountains, a unit chasing the Third Army appeared.
The garrison had never seen the flags of High Britannia, but they

heard the news.

Their flag had a white base and two red lines.

The High Britannians opened fire, and the Third Army soldiers who fell behind were hit.

The acting commander of the garrison immediately sent out a unit to intercept.

And closed the gates of the city. This would prevent the enemy from entering the city even if they broke through.

It was a standard response that didn't have any issue.
Like how they trained every day, the soldiers acted swiftly.

The intercepting units set up formations to protect their fleeing comrades. The pursuing High Britannian Army numbered nearly 10,000. With just 3,000 men in the intercepting unit, a direct confrontation would definitely result in a loss.

Not just that, a unit from Langobalt Kingdom appeared in the north.

It was a perilous situation.

If the fleeing Third Army units couldn't enter the fort quickly…

And then someone from the fleeing unit was shouting angrily at the gate. "General Buxlow is injured! Open the gate! Get a doctor!"

According to the regulations of the Imperial Army, even if you spotted allied forces and wanted to grant them entry, you would still need to verify their identity.
In such a situation, the commander of the garrison unit needed to confirm whether General Buxlow and his Staff Officers were there.

The commander ordered 'not to open the gate first'.

However, when he headed to the window beside the gate as per standard procedure, the soldiers outside the gate shouted 'Open the gate! Get a doctor quick!"

The intercepting unit was also suffering significant casualties under the rifle fire of the High Britannians, the Langobalt army was also

approaching.

It wasn't clear what exactly happened then.

But the fact was, the gate was opened before the verification was completed.

Did the guards open the gate because of the tense atmosphere? Or was it the order of the commander?

In the end, the gate opened to allow the unit being pursued to come in.

The Third Army imposters abandoned their flags and assaulted with their rifles.

They were actually High Britannian soldiers in disguise!

It didn't take long to seize the west gate of the fortress.

The 3,000 men intercepting unit didn't receive any support from the fortress, and was destroyed by the High Britannians.

The northern gates were also suppressed, and the 20,000 Langobalt army broke through. A part of the defenders raised the white flag.

The soldier who submitted this report was a guard on the western wall. He threw his sword and armour away and jumped into the river when he saw the white flag, and escaped by swimming through the river.

Regis pressed his fingers onto his forehead.

"Well… Such a decision is understandable…"

"To be tricked by such a common scheme, can you really say that… But shooting at your own units in order to deceive the fortress guards, that's remarkable."

"His plan was to trick the enemy soldiers with a few of his soldiers'

lives. A proper army would never do that."

"If such an inhumane order is issued, the soldiers would lose their loyalty right?"

"… Correct… Well, loyalty isn't the only thing that would spur the troops on, right?"

"This is exactly the sort of scheme that man would use…"

"Colonel Oswald Coulthard?"

"Yes."

Latreille nodded bitterly.

He suffered heavy losses because of such vicious tricks at Fort Bonaire.

Soldiers were hidden inside the barrels of gunpowder, who waited for a signal to ignite it. And of course, the ones who ignited it were blown to smithereens.

The de facto commander of the High Britannians was actually Colonel Oswald Coulthard, who liked to use such sacrificial tactics.

"Did the enemy actually know that the soldiers of the Third Army are extremely loyal to Lieutenant General Buxlow? Did they make use of that…"
"Yes… They couldn't attack the Empire, and with their retreat route by land cut off, they probably then considered attacking Grebauvar City."

Regis also did all his preparations… But was he really ready? He was a bit afraid.

If the enemy could get the help of the Langobalt Kingdom, then the best move wouldn't be to attack this place, but to move along the river towards the sea, and return to their home country.

Or they could ride horses. The Langobalt Kingdom was famous for their horses, and was renowned for their cavalry.

Regis guessed —— Did High Britannia attack Grebauvar City

because of the wilfulness of the new Queen?

Even so, he couldn't tell what meaning there was in attacking Grebauvar City.

But from what he just heard, Oswald was well prepared for the attack on Grebauvar City. Did he even predict the wilfulness of the Queen?

Or was there some other meaning behind this operation?

"... I don't understand."

"What is it, Sir Regis?"

"Ah, well… I can't really tell what Colonel Oswald Coulthard is thinking and his personality."

"He is an enemy you have never met before. Isn't this natural?"

"Well… Just like how you can grasp the personality of the author after reading his book, you can understand the character of the commander after seeing his tactics… and he is too strong."

"Is that so?"

Latreille seemed to doubt that.

Regis didn't intend to put it in such a weird way, but Oswald didn't seem to perceive it like that.

Also, since Regis couldn't see through Oswald's thought process, it wasn't convincing at all.

—— There should be some objective behind this.

Even though sacrificing one's forces was a vicious tactic, it was very effective against the Belgarian soldiers who had a stoutly righteous nature. Oswald was smart. His tactics were truly excellent.

But on the grand strategy level, his move was full of blunders. As if he was seeking his own death.

They could stimulate their economy through war, but there wasn't a

need to pick a fight with the Belgarian Empire, who was strongest in the region.

The tactics utilizing their new rifles were amazing, and they did reach the capital with just 30,000 men.

Seizing Grebauvar City in no time was an astounding feat, even though they should be retreating.

It was true that Belgaria's evaluation would fall drastically if they could hold on to that fort, and they might be able to turn the tide if the neighbouring nations launch attacks too.

And Regis was doing all he could to ensure it doesn't come to that…

Maybe they were using hostages to negotiate for a safe passage back to High Britannia?

But Regis doubted the possibility of Latreille agreeing to negotiate. It was hard to imagine the Imperial Army negotiating with the enemy that dealt heavy casualties to them for the sake of hostages, and allow the enemy commander to escape.

Regis nodded.

Latreille said with a sigh.

"... It appears that Buxlow chose the wrong garrison commander. Even if his commander was in danger, they should prioritize on the safety of the fortress. The commander has to be someone like that."

"That's right. I have a way to confirm their identity without spending too much time…"

"Hmm?"

"For example, let someone who knows the faces of the Lieutenant General and his second in command leave the fortress with the intercepting units and wait in front of the gate. They would die if that was the enemy, but this is a better choice than losing the fortress and many more people dying."

"An adequate strategy."

“If they think about it calmly, they will be able to come up with this idea quickly. They were probably too anxious then.”

“That might be possible.”

Regis pointed at the city part of the map.
“First, we need to rescue the citizens. There might be some sacrifices, but we won’t be able to fight at full power if the enemy is holding a large number of hostages.”

“Isn’t it normal to treat the citizens of a fallen city as though they are dead?”

“That should be after we tried rescuing them.”

Latreille looked momentarily surprised.

He then crossed his arms, closed his eyes and pondered.
“... Of course… I don’t think letting the citizens die without even trying is a good thing.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any plans, Sir Regis?”
Latreille opened his right eye and asked.

Regis placed his hand on his chin and thought.

“Hmmm…”
“Even a famous strategist won’t be able to think up a plan so simply huh.”

Regis almost spat.

“F-Famous strategist…?”

“Going by your performance, such an evaluation isn’t unthinkable.”

“Erm, I do know of several ways to rescue the citizens from that city.”

“You actually know a few!?”

“I am still hesitant about which one is better…”

Latreille opened his eyes wide.

Regis scratched his head.

“Well… Although I only know the things written in books…”

“I read plenty of military books too, but didn’t know of any that listed such strategies. Which book is that country from?”

“No, I don’t think that is a book which can be found in the courts…”

Regis liked creative works such as entertainment novels, dramas and essays. Even though he was fine with reading anything with words, books with fresh ideas were still more interesting to him.

Latreille’s adjutant Germain seemed to think that such entertainment works are of no value to the Empire, so Latreille probably also didn’t read them.

There weren’t any books on the shelves of his reading room that Regis liked.

—— Well, if the Prince that is most likely to be the next Emperor had books like ‘Tales of the antagonists’ on his book shelf, it would make me uneasy. It is a story where girls are locked into boxes labelled ‘food’.

It made his hair stood on ends.

“Well… leaving aside where my knowledge came from, I have a proposal that could be considered a plan.”

“Yes, then explain the details after everybody is here.”

“Understood.”

Was it time for the others to come?

Latreille smiled awkwardly.

“Fu… As expected, Sir Regis is different from the others.”

“The things I do know are widespread knowledge.”

“No, not about strategy. As the Field Marshal and prince, I excel in

swordsmanship too. There are many who follow my will, but few who object my view.”

“Eh? Did I say anything rude?”

“Fufu… Just now, when I said ‘treat the citizens of a fallen city as though they are dead’, didn’t you say ‘That should be after we tried rescuing them’?”

“T-That is…”

Regis was frightened.

That was indeed a rude remark.

“I know that you are very competent. However, I wonder why Argentina forgives your insolence and disrespect to etiquettes… Or at least, that’s what I used to think. But after speaking with you, I am starting to understand.”

“Well…”

Regis didn’t understand if he was being lectured or praised, and could only nod vaguely.

If this was about etiquettes, it would undoubtedly be a criticism.

However, Latreille was smiling peacefully, an expression Regis had never seen before.

“After I got into my current position, I had never been lectured like this.”

“Ah, well things like lecturing…”

“Yes, Sir Regis is right. Giving up because it is too difficult can be rightfully criticized to be laziness. Thank you for your admonition.”

“Yes, but if we lost, then the decision to not push ourselves would be the right decision—— That’s how it would be…”

Latreille shook his head.

“The commander cannot explore all possibilities. Nevertheless, I

drew my conclusion too hastily. I will change my habit of making crude decisions."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Intermission

Grebauvar City——

The water inside the pool of the courtyard flowed from the river. As it was an ever flowing body of water, the air turned a bit cold.

On the balcony of the courtyard opposite it, a roof was erected to block out the sun. Lounge chairs tilted at a slight angle were placed here.

A net was drawn up, which had great air circulation.

It was a place that could let others forgot about the heat in July.

The woman lying on the chair in a silk dress was eating fruits.

“Fufu… As expected, the fortresses in Belgaria are nice.”

She was the Queen of High Britannia, Margaret Steelart.

Besides her was a maid holding a wine glass. She was a servant from the captured Belgarians.

There were those holding wine bottles, fruits, and people who would serve Margaret at her leisure. All of them were waiting at the side.

The only man in this place was standing at the entrance of the balcony, a fair distance from the chair.

He wore a white uniform, with a long and thin single edged sword hanging on his waist.

That was Colonel Oswald Coulthard, who served as the strategist.

“My glorious Queen Margaret, it is wonderful that Grebauvar City pleases you.”

“Ehh, I thought I would be at the Le Brane palace by this time. But I ended up in this city deep in the mountains to the north, how hilarious. I’m not satisfied. My wishes didn’t come true. The only thing I like about this city is that it doesn’t please me at all alright?”

“... My deep apologies. It’s all because of my incompetence.”

Oswald bowed deeply.

The High Britannia Army pushed all the way to the Imperial Capital Versailles.

However, the supply unit that should be coming was missing, and a report that the unit had been decimated took its place instead. And the Fourth Army seemed to be approaching from behind.

Oswald felt this would be a death sentence in a metaphorical way, and proposed retreat.

And Queen Margaret burst out in laughter in a manner Oswald had never seen before, celebrating this event like a child.

She was treating the war as entertainment to kill time.

Be it the prosperity of High Britannia, the extravagance of the Belgarian buildings or treasures, all these didn’t matter to her. She was bestowed with status, beauty and capability… With all that in her possession, she had grown tired of living, which was only boredom and annoyance to her.

Margaret squirmed her body on the chair.

The dress slid off, revealing one of her pale white thighs.

“Hah… The Belgarians aren’t here yet? Isn’t this vacation a little too long?”

“The enemy unit made camp about 3 miles away this afternoon. Our reports state that there were just 20,000 troops, but they brought a lot of pioneers with them. They are probably planning something before attacking us.”

“Fufufu… I’m looking forward to it.”

“I don’t think anything that would worry the great Queen Margaret will happen. Please be at ease.”

“I’m bored to death.”

“Well then, I will summon the orchestra.”

“I heard them hundreds of time.”

“Then the valuable wine…”

“They aren’t that great. They’re delicious, but dull things.”

“Let the captives duel to the death…”

“I don’t care which of them dies.”

“Then, allow me to duel with them.”

“That’s boring too. No matter who your opponent is, you will first have a difficult time, and emerge victorious in the end.”

“… I am very sorry.”

At this moment, the door leading to the main building was barged open.

A young and strong voice echoed:

“Ohh! So there you are, Margaret!”

It was in Germanian.

The one entering was a soldier wearing a tidy uniform—— The new king of Langobalt Kingdom, Paul Langschultz. About 25 years of age, he looked competent, but young.

He acted as if he knew everything in this world, and would sprout philosophical views occasionally. But he didn’t have the knowledge of the elderly. Which meant that he didn’t know about being old.

He was a very disciplined man, combing all his hair back and wearing his uniform neatly in a textbook fashion. There were a lot of medals on his chest.

The correct stride and the correct tone of speech, he did everything by the book. In the Germanian Federation, the ways to wash your face, use a fork and wield a knife were all recorded in books. And he was a man who would put all the things written in the textbook into practice.

However, even the Germanian Federation didn't have a manual about interest in women—— Paul liked Margaret very much.

Ever since he proposed to her the first time they met, he had been persisting in doing so all this while.

"Look! I found a strange dress in the city! You like queer things right? Please enjoy yourself."

"Ara, is that so… But the strangest thing of all is you, Paul."

Margaret replied in fluent Germanian, and Paul squinted happily.

Oswald was still smiling lightly.

He bowed to the king of an allied nation respectfully.

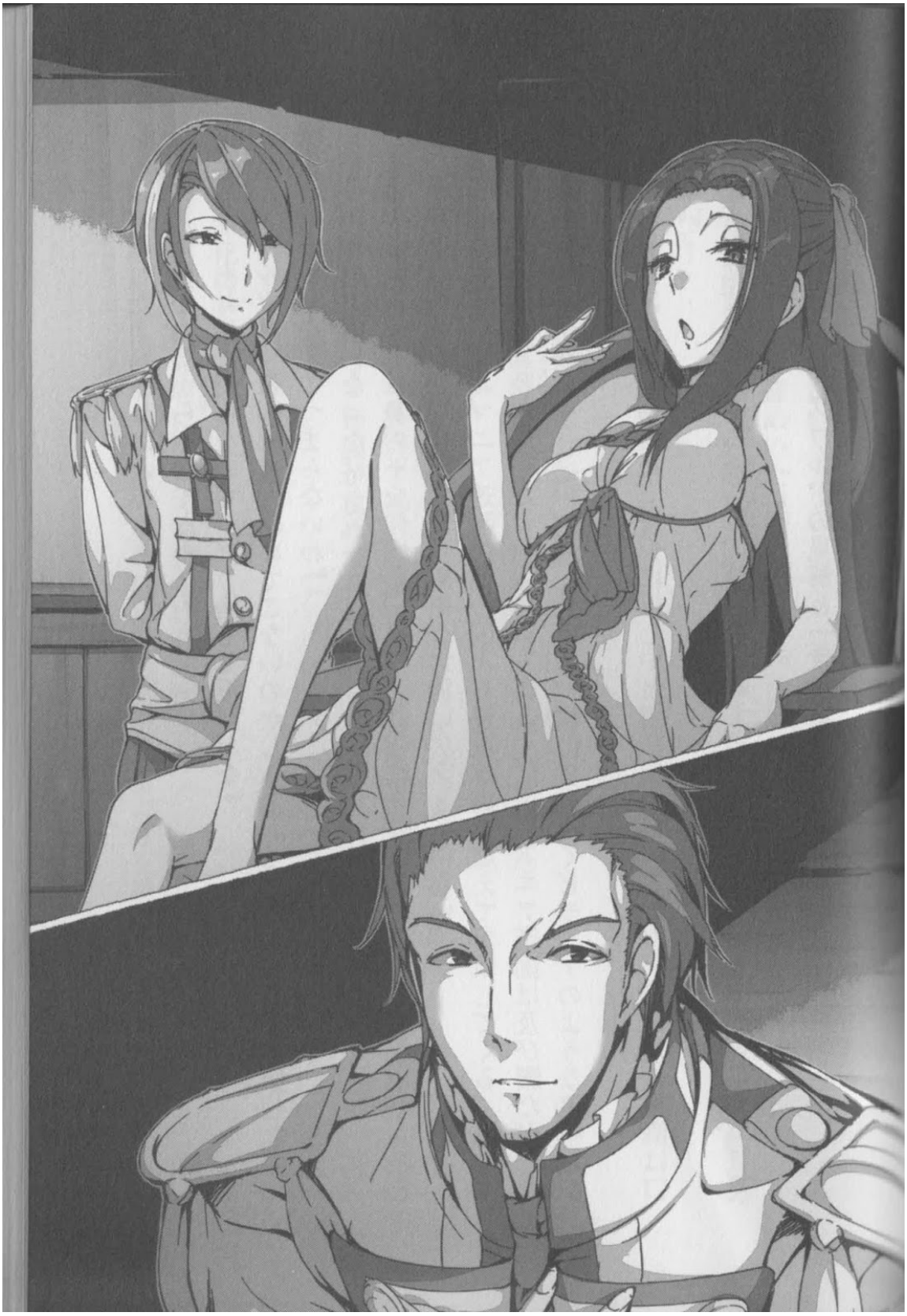
However, his heart was filled with doubt.

If Oswald was to weigh whether Margaret's words leaned towards compliment or sarcasm, it would probably be the latter.

He didn't think the other party would be stupid enough to not understand that, Paul still seemed really pleased.

Indeed, he was strange.

"Oh, Margaret, you are as beautiful as ever. By the way, what do you think about the dress I gifted you yesterday? That was a really beautiful thing."



“I don’t really like it, so I threw it away.”

“I see. It’s a boring thing, so throwing it away is the right decision.”

“Neh, the Belgarian Empire isn’t attacking yet? We even occupied a base, it would be boring if there isn’t any battle.”

Paul fell into deep thought.

Even though he was enamoured by Margaret, and would occasionally glance at Margaret’s revealed thigh despite keeping his back straight, his military capability wasn’t shoddy.

“Once summer is over, the other nations of the Germanian Federation will finish their war preparation. There are rumours that Estaburg Kingdom to the east is intending to declare war. Hispania might be half hearted, but when the northern and eastern frontlines start to heat up, they will join the fray too. As expected of these piranhas, snapping at the bait.”

Paul usually spoke in a sure tone. He was very confident that he was right. He wouldn’t say anything he was not certain about. Instead of making idle guesses, he would rather gather information and research—— That was the Germanian way of thinking.

Paul’s analysis was similar to how Oswald saw it.
As expected, this guy wasn’t incompetent.

Margaret looked at him reproachingly.

“I don’t care about the other countries. When will a bunch of people die? When will there be a mountain of corpses?”

“The Belgarian Empire has 50,000 pioneers——”

“I already heard that from Oswald.”

“Hmm.”

Paul looked displeased, and turned his eyes to Oswald.

Oswald lowered his head respectfully.

“... I apologize for overstepping my bounds, I already analyzed the situation on the Queen’s orders.”

“It’s fine, you are the strategist for High Britannia after all. There is no problem for you to report such matters to your commander-in-

chief. But there is still no telling when the Belgarian Empire will strike.”

A concise answer.

Margaret shrugged.

“I’m bored to death.”

“It would be troublesome if you don’t become my queen.”

“Ara, but you see… Becoming the queen consort of a small nation is much duller than being a queen regent.”

Saying the term ‘small nation’ to an allied state all of a sudden made Oswald break out in cold sweat.

But Paul didn’t seem to mind.

“I don’t plan on being the king of a small nation forever. Recently St.Prussia is subjugating other countries under its control. They would definitely not leave us alone. I will use Grebauvar as the starting point to seize Belgaria’s territory. I will then conquer the neighbouring nations and destroy St.Prussia!”

“If you become king of the Germanian Federation, I will consider it.”
“Yes!”

Paul nodded confidently.

“For the sake of my marriage with Margaret, first, I will make the Belgarian Army fall on their face. In that case, we should attack pre-emptively. The enemy numbers 20,000, we have 30,000, there is no reason we will lose.”

He was not speaking in jest.

For Langobalt, this was just a small part of his total forces. However, the 10,000 troops in Grebauvar were all the High Britannians had left.

They lost 20,000 men and the main battle fleet in this war.

And letting him use the High Britannian soldiers as if they were his

was unacceptable.

“Pardon me for being blunt, but I must protest. The High Britannian forces are exhausted after the long campaign, and couldn’t match the pace of your Kingdom’s elite forces.”
Which mean that if Paul wanted to attack, he could only bring his own forces.

Paul pondered over it.
“Hmmm… You still need some time to recover huh.”

“The Imperial First Army here is flying the flag of Prince Latreille. The most elite group of the Empire. They have large cavalry forces, it would be disadvantageous to fight them on the plain.”

An atmosphere of being tired of battle hung over the soldiers. It was difficult to keep morale up.

Even though Paul look displeased that his proposal was rejected, he was no fool.

He changed the topic:
“Speaking of which, intel reported that a certain strategist joined the First Army… Do you know who he is? Someone by the name of Auric.”
“That is…”

“My agent emphasized that the strategist is renowned in the Empire. However, I have never heard of his name.”

“He is the strategist who took down Fort Volks.”

Paul opened his eyes with intrigue.

“Hoh. The report I received was that the Fourth Princess of Belgaria seized that impregnable fortress. Am I mistaken?”

“As the strategist of the Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, he proposed many strategies. From taking down Fort Volks to cutting off our supply lines… a very dangerous character.”

“Yes. Cutting off the supplies of an army is a rather common strategy.”

“It is as you say.”

Destroying a fleet of battleships with just sail ships, and creating fog… It made one wonder if he made a deal with the devil in exchange for his prowess.

But no matter what the explanation was, it was just a meaningless excuse after the battle was lost.

If only Prince Latreille was here, it was possible to do something by targeting his weak points. However, normal schemes won’t work against this strategist.

“Since there is a famous strategist, then giving them more time would be unwise.”

“If I may… I think that letting exhausted soldiers fight outside the fortress would be even worse. The structure of Grebauvar is a little unique, the defences of the city side is weaker. If they use siege weapons operated by the pioneers, they would probably target the southern city walls.”

“Even if they take down the city, there is still a wall as sturdy as the outside between the city and the fortress.”

“That might be so, but their priority would be saving the citizens. I heard that is the kind of person Sir Auric is.”

“Hmmm… Then what kind of man is that Second Prince?”

“... If he does not value the words of Sir Auric, he wouldn’t recruit him as a strategist in the first place. He must have acknowledged Sir Auric’s talent in earlier battles before recruiting him.”

Regis d’Auric was Argentina’s strategist and because Altina was an amateur in military affairs, she delegated command to him.

To loan out such an important strategist, did that mean she had no intention on fighting Prince Latreille anymore?

Or she realized that this battle would decide the fate of the Empire, and sent her strategist to aid?

There was intel that the Strategist Auric was in the First Army, but no report on the whereabouts of the Fourth Princess. It was unlikely since their banners weren't seen… But maybe the Fourth Army was here as well.

If the Black Knight came as well, then fighting outside the fortress would be a terrible idea.

There was no way that Oswald would know the truth.

No matter how capable he was it would be hard to imagine that the reason was that—— In order to be exempted from the practical test, Regis is using this expedition as the replacement.

Even the dogs raised by Belgaria were strong —— That was the belief of the neighbouring states.

"If the city side gets taken, it would be easy to approach the wall from a blind spot, making defending difficult. In my opinion, the southern part of the steel production street which is the weakest part of Grebauvar City's defence is the enemy's target."

"Are you certain?"

"This is just a speculation of the enemy's plan, I can't say for sure…"

"If that is so, I won't dispatch my troops. Unlike going out to attack the enemy, how could I send them to a place that the enemy might not even attack!?"

"Understood. I will deploy High Britannia's riflemen."

"Leave the cannons in the fortress. If this place doesn't fall, we will not lose."

"… Understood."

Why should he listen to the orders of King Langobalt with regards to the placement of High Britannia's cannons?

Oswald wasn't Paul's subordinate.

He probably thought that Margaret would wed him, and was treating the High Britannia Army as his own things.

Despite that, it was just a problem of wording it.

Oswald's original intention was to place the cannons on the fortress side, and he didn't plan to keep all the High Britannia troops around Margaret.

No matter what kind of strategy it was, with the new model of rifles, they could handle any kind of siege weapons.

Or rather, the enemy prepared 50,000 pioneers, and probably won't just use them on siege weapons.

He heard that Fort Volks fell because of a tunnel they dug.

But this place was near a river, so water would seep in if they tried digging one, so that was not feasible.

Another possible method was to build a fort to the south of Grebauvar.

For the Imperial army, they could withdraw the First Army after securing the frontlines.

Compared to taking down the fort, this method wouldn't intimidate the other nations. But on the grand scale, this was enough to stop the other nations from thinking about invading Belgaria.

If the enemy used this strategy, then they would have to leave the fortress and attack them, just like what Paul said. If they didn't fight they would lose the strategic value of the fort, which would be the same as defeat.

Depending on what the enemy did, they might have to resort to fighting on the open plains——

However, the enemy numbered just 20,000. No matter how highly the Imperial First Army's soldiers evaluate themselves, this fact still remains.

Did the Empire have more reinforcements?

If that was so, it would be a race to see whether the nations of the Germanian Federation invaded first, or the Empire's reinforcement

reached earlier.

No matter what, now was the time to endure.

Uwah~ Margaret yawned.

Oswald felt his heart pound. If she orders an attack, the whole strategical plan would be moot.

However, she seemed to be tired of all these talks about military tactics, and made a shooing gesture.

“I sweated a lot. I want to take a bath, prepare one for me.”
Oswald sighed in relief.

He then chased Paul out respectfully, and let the maids prepare the bath.

Chapter 4/5 - The Battle to Liberate the Citizens of Grebauvar City

Imperial Year 851 July 20th——

It had been half a month since Regis left the capital for the expedition.

Even though camping outside was inconvenient, it was normal to spend two to three months when attacking a fortress. It wouldn't be strange if it dragged on for half a year.

The soldiers didn't complain too much.

However, they couldn't afford to use six months on the recapture operation.

That was the reason why Latreille was leading the campaign personally and committed the elites of the Imperial First Army.

It would be hard to tell how the other nations would act after three months.

Be it the Germanian Federation, Langobalt Kingdom or the Hispania Empire to the southwest, they all had the possibility of invading.

A long campaign required extensive preparation. They would need to procure weapons and food, then inspect the routes and employ a large number of labourers to ferry the goods.

Even though the Belgarian Empire was fighting a tough war, these nations probably couldn't attack immediately.

They would need to scheme and plan their invasion. If the place they were attacking coincides, that would require a further round of discussion…

High Britannia had already conspired with some nations of the Germanian Federation. That's why Varden Grand Duchy attacked Fort Volks at the very start of the war.

And now, they were combining their forces with Langobalt Kingdom.

The other states were still observing the situation. If August passes and they still couldn't take the fort before September, the other countries would probably invade—— Regis speculated.

He had no intention to spend that much time, which would lead to

such a fate.

Evening.

The heat in the day dissipated, and the temperature was now more pleasant. The sun setting in the west dyed the sky in orange yellow.

The shadows of the mountains grew longer, darkening the western half of Grebauvar City.

The sun would completely set soon.

Regis was surrounded by tough soldiers.

No matter where he looked, he could see soldiers in armour holding pikes and shields, waiting for the order to advance.

The infantry was at the center of the formation, flanked on both sides by cavalry.

Right now, Regis was at the middle of the infantry group, where the headquarters were. The officers around him were all in full plate armour and riding horses.

Regis couldn't ride, so he could only walk. After much persuasion and pleading, he didn't have to wear armour, but on his waist was a long sword he had not worn for a very long time. To be honest, it was really bothersome.

In the Fourth Army, he could ride a carriage or ride with Altina on the same horse… And of course, he couldn't enjoy such special privileges here.

Instead of the success of the plan, he was more worried about keeping up with the march.

It was time.

Bugles signalled for silence.
And the place quieted down.

Latreille appeared on horseback behind the 20,000 troops, and in front of the pioneers. He then shouted:

“Soldiers of the Belgarian Empire! The enemy is the despicable High Britannians and the Langobalt Kingdom that dared step into our lands in the midst of our war! Those bastards conned the soldiers in the fortress, and took the city with underhanded means! We have to deliver retribution like thunderous lightning onto these arrogant fools who recklessly invaded the sovereign land of the Empire with cheap tricks! Elites of the Imperial First Army, justice is on our side!”

Hooraa! The army responded with an intimidating roar.

They thrust their pikes into the air, and yelled “Long live Prince Latreille! Vive l'empire!”

Latreille drew his sword.

It was the Emperor’s sword ‘Arme Victoire Volonte’. Legends say the long single edged sword could bring victory to an army.

He sliced through the air.

And pointed it towards Grebauvar fortress city.

“Avance de l'armée!!!”

In order to convey Latreille’s orders, the bugles sounded.

The unit advanced orderly.

Regis started walking too.

The speed matched the pace of the infantry.

Despite that, Regis had to do everything he could to keep up.

Even though the infantry wore steel armour, held long pikes in their right hand and large shield in their left, and had to match the strides of people around them, they could still maintain a certain speed.

Regis had to run to keep up.

His breathing turned ragged in no time.

His legs were trembling.

I’m going to die.

Maybe the first one to die in this war will be me. Death from falling down—— That would be awful.

Even though he was keeping pace with the bugles, the rhythm was getting faster.

It was almost as fast as a sprint.

What is happening. It was still 60Ar (4287m) from the fortress.

According to the battle plans, they should advance to 40Ar (2858m), and only the front half of the infantry would continue moving forward. As the enemy might sent out an intercepting unit, the cavalry at the flanks readied themselves for a charge.

“C-Could it be… W-We are charging…?”

Regis wondered if he got it wrong, and was thinking whether he wandered into the infantry at the front half of the formation.

He could see the figure of Prince Latreille on his white horse so that shouldn’t be so. Did the plan change to the entire army charging without Regis knowing about it, he wondered.

Gradually, he fell behind and the infantry behind the headquarters caught up with him.

A heavily armoured soldier with a helmet on his head asked baffedly:

“What’s the matter, Sir Strategist!?”

Before the battle started, Regis was introduced as ‘the strategist seconded from the Fourth Army, the tactician who took down Fort Volks with just 2000 men’. Story about his battles with High Britannia had already spread far and wide.

However, Regis’ breathing was ragged now, and instead of a strategist, he looked more like a patient who was about to keel over.

That’s what would happen if someone who only reads and seldom walks was suddenly thrown into a march.

“Hah… Hah… Erm… I need to… catch my breath…”

Regis was panting painfully with a hand on his chest.

He was at his limits.

But he would be stampeded by the soldiers behind if he stopped. After they marched over him, Regis would be flattened like a carpet.

He wanted to puke.

His shoulders were grabbed.

It was the helmeted soldier.

“Hey! Let the carriage fetch you! Sir Strategist appears to be ill!”

The armoured footmen besides him nodded.

“Yes! He only walked for a bit, and his face is turning green!”

“His breathing is ragged, is it pneumonia? Hey, hurry!”

To them, this was just a brisk walk, and they could still move and talk at the same time.

As expected of the elites gathered by the First Army. Or maybe, Regis was just too weak.

In order to ferry any casualties fast, a two horse carriage followed behind the headquarters.

Regis was brought there.

The wooden platform was covered in pelt, but even so, Regis could see stars dancing after his head hit the deck.

The doctor on the carriage looked at Regis hurriedly. He was short and fat, which was rare among Belgarians.

“Are you okay, Sir Strategist!?”

“I’m dying…”

“What!”

“Hah… Hah… It’s been really long since I last ran this fast.”

“Hmm? Run where?”

The doctor tilted his head.

And so, Regis became the first casualty in the battle to save the citizens of Grebauvar City.

Latreille spoke loudly:

“Rear guards, halt. Vanguards, continue advancing!”

About 40Ar (2858m) away from Grebauvar, half of the unit stopped, and only the vanguards continued.

Regis who had recovered mostly left the cargo platform of the medical carriage and started observing the battle. This was a covered carriage drawn by two horses, and he would have the same field of vision as if he was riding a horse by getting onto the driver’s seat.

“The enemy… is not coming out?”

“Sir Strategist? Are you feeling better?”

It was shameful, but Regis responded to the doctor honestly.

“I’m fine now. I just couldn’t keep up with the march. I didn’t expect the pace of the First Army’s infantry to be so fast.”

“I see… The important thing is that you are not ill.”

He said very doctor-like words kindly.

Altina would ask him to ride with her in such a situation. Jerome would lecture him: “You call yourself an Imperial soldier!? You scum!”

Regis remembered about supporting the eastern front, and wondered if Jerome was fine.

It must be hard for him to go to unfamiliar grounds. Or rather, he would make others feel it was hard.

Regis considered not just writing letters to Altina, but to the east too. Jerome probably won't reply.

Boom! The sound of a cannon rang out.

White smoke erupted from the fortress part of Grebauvar.

The advancing infantry of the First Army also brought cannons, but it was too still too far away.

The Belgaria Empire captured some cannons from High Britannia some days ago. Which were 41 Elswick cannons, with a range of 45Ar (3216m).

However, there were limited munitions, and the artillery troops were not familiar with breech loaded cannons. Therefore, they brought along their old mid range cannons. Its range was 28Ar (2000m).

As the enemy was firing from the top of the city walls, their range was even further. If the Belgarians want to exchange fire, they would need to advance under the bombardment to close the distance.

Despite that, there wasn't heavy casualty like the defeat during the battle of Lafressange hill.

The infantry spread out in their advance, minimizing the impact of the bombardment.

They learned from the Seventh Army that a tight formation was undesirable and would lead to huge losses.

The Imperial Army weren't retarded. They had studied and trained extensively in anti bombardment measures.

The First Army infantry advanced in a scattered formation. If the enemy formed up to defend the assault, then the imperials would also gather —— They learned such a tactic.

In the Fourth Army led by Altina, no one but Regis would have thought of such a strategy.

However, the First Army have strategist like Germain who was known as a brilliant tactician. After they reviewed the strategy of the

Seventh Army in their loss, they came up with this plan.

Because of their excellence, Regis spent most of the time during conferences just listening in.

The commander of the artillery unit issued his order.

“Ready the cannons!”

The Belgarians had closed in sufficiently. With thundering cannon shots, they scored direct hits on the walls of Grebauvar.

Grey smog lingered in the air.

The stone walls turned into debris, the High Britannian soldiers fell from the impact.

Compared to shots hitting the ground, the ones that hit the stone walls were much more damaging to the surrounding.

The stone fragments flew at the troops nearby.

The enemy had the advantage in both range and power, and also had the high ground. Although Regis thought his side was very disadvantaged——

But the facts weren’t so. Shots from the Belgarian army were actually destroying the cannons of High Britannia.

There wasn’t any secret behind this, it was purely the difference in abilities between the artillery soldiers.

The High Britannian troops were adequately trained, but the Imperial artillery unit handpicked from the Imperial Army of 200,000 were in a whole other league.

The made up for the difference in specs with their own ability.

Regis was awed by the scene he saw from the driver’s seat.

—— The difference in ability of the artillery units was that wide!

His opponents were barbarians when Regis worked in Marquis Thénezay’s army, the cannons were just for intimidation back then.

The Fourth Army, or rather, the Beilschmidt Border Regiment focus on pikes and swords, so their artillery wasn't well trained.

There was a huge gulf between trained and untrained archers, so Regis knew that artillery and riflemen would be affected by training too. But he never imagined it to be so pronounced.

He could visibly tell that the attacks of the enemy were weakening.

Their foe also realized that, and turned their cannons to retaliate.

—— It's about time.

Regis literally rolled off the carriage.

He passed by some of the injured that was carried back from the frontlines. He couldn't get used to it no matter how many times he saw it.

The sight of soldiers bleeding and losing their limbs sapped Regis' strength away.

But Regis pulled himself together and started running.

Making his way through the troops on standby, he returned to Latreille who was stationed at the headquarters. The distance wasn't that far that he would fall along the way.

"Your Highness!"

"Yes… Regis huh. I didn't see you, and was wondering what happened."
"I'm sorry. Well… I couldn't keep up with the speed of the advance… so I got onto the medical carriage."

"During the advance…?"

Latreille tilted his head.

Germain who was beside them asked:

"Are you feeling alright? Did you get hit by a ricochet?"

They definitely didn't understand that there were people who simply

couldn’t keep up with the march.

“Erm… Well, not feeling well… something like that… A-Anyway! This is a good chance!”

Regis pointed to the enemy formation.

Latreille nodded.

“Hmm, that is right. The enemy’s cannons are targeting our artillery. Alright, Germain, order the siege weapons to advance!”

“Yes Sir!!”

The command was issued.

Bugles played out another tune.

A part of the infantry standing by at the back began their advance.

They were not soldiers within the pioneer division, but refugees of the war.

However, the men of the Empire had the confidence that they were the strongest in the continent. On top of that, they were fueled by the rage of the High Britannians destroying their homes and farmlands. That’s why they were willing to follow the army.

The men shouted as they pushed the siege weapons.

On the gigantic shelf structure were a mechanism made out of spring and wood.

It was a catapult.

Something that was used before cannons were invented, a weapon from the last era.

The mechanism used the power of the loaded spring to launch rocks, and was weak when compared to cannons. The rocks might be heavy, but were still light when compared to cannonballs.

And the sizes of the rocks weren’t uniform, so the accuracy was low.

The weapon was rather ineffective.

Maybe the High Britannians were pointing at this ancient weapon and laughing.

“Halt——!!”

The command was issued.

The six catapults approached the designated distance, and took aim at the steel production street.

They were some distance away from the fort, so they won’t be hit by rifle and cannon fire that easily.

If they captured the city area of Grebauvar, it would give the attackers a big advantage.

At this moment, the High Britannians started bombarding the catapult.

A crisp sound echoed out.

One of the catapults collapsed. Its foundation was hit, the wheel flew off and it fell. The pioneers pushing it ran away shrieking.

The sun was about to set.

Although the sky was completely red, the ground was turning dim.

The heat from cannon fire set the catapult ablaze, illuminating the surrounding. The figures of the scattering soldiers were revealed.

The Belgarian artillery focused their firepower on the enemy cannons.

The High Britannians also retaliated. It turned into a heated shootout between artillery once again.

In the end, the five remaining catapult was disregarded by the enemy.

As Regis planned—— The ancient catapult won’t attract enemy fire. Their focus would shift to the Belgarian cannons that were a bigger threat.

Latreille ordered:

“Launch!!”

Highly trained soldiers operated the catapult.

They released the catches upon orders.

The loaded spring expanded, and a wooden arm that was longer than a carriage moved. It launched the rocks placed at its very tip.

These rocks were tied to ropes.

The ropes that were placed away from the wooden arm gradually extended and turn taut.

Just like the shrouds on sailing ships, the ropes were intertwined. And because of the heavier weight, its range was shorter…

But it managed to go over the walls.

Going over the vast river, the ropes hung onto the wall.

It was going just as planned.

The pioneers cheered.

The infantry that was spread out in their advance charged towards the bridges made of shrouds. They had been enduring the enemy’s fire one sidedly, and could finally turn on the offensive.

Roaring as if they had already won, they charged with pikes in hand.

Unlike bridges on the ground, they couldn’t run over the bridges made from ropes. If they miss a step, they will fall into the river.

That might be so, but many soldiers still ran over it.

“Waarrrggghhh!!”

Even though they practiced this many times before, it was impressive for them to run like this.

And it was dim now, making it harder to see their feet.

If the soldiers could storm the walls and open the gate, the cavalry would be able to charge in. They would then be able to at least take the steel production street.

Germain who was watching from a distance nodded.

“Your Highness, our soldiers are scaling the walls with the shroud bridges! If this carries on, we might be able to take the gate!”

“Hmm… What about the enemies’ movement?”

“They are preparing to engage… But the cannons and rifles could only cut a couple of ropes, it won’t be a problem!”

“Is that so.”

Regis felt something was off about Latreille and Germain’s conversation.
Should he say something…

Instead of that, the reaction of the High Britannian army was more important.

—— How would they handle this.

The unassuming ancient catapults actually made a bridge of shrouds. The cannons and rifles might be able to damage the shroud, but it would be difficult to break it.

One by one, the soldiers crossed the bridge and prepared to leap over the walls.

If they could make it in, it would just be a matter of them before they secure the gate.

In close quarters combat, the Belgarians would never lose to the High Britannians.

It was already night.

Under the dim night sky, the soldiers of the Imperial First Army finally scaled the walls of Grebauvar.

They took out most of the enemy on the walls with muskets and bows, but there were still some left.

The enemy raised their rifles.

The soldiers thrust their pikes.

“Hyaaa——!!”

The tip of the pike was aimed at the heart of the High Britannian soldier. And pierced it!

Blood soaked the city walls.
“Bleah!”

After spitting out red black blood, the enemy fell.

“Waarrrgghhh!!”

With a fierce cry the Belgarian soldiers stood tall on the city walls.

Gunshots erupted.

After several rifle reports, several bloody holes appeared on the Belgarian pikeman’s armour.

“Ahh!?”

Looking down into the steel production street from the city walls, they could see several thousand riflemen waiting for them.

The commander raised one hand.

“Fire!”

The ordered was given in High Britannian tongue.

Gunshots rang out again, and more soldiers who scaled the wall collapsed.

“Gyaahhh!”

There were some who jumped onto the streets from the wall.

It won't end well if someone wearing armour leap off from high ground.

When they hit solid ground, their knees made cracking sound.

"Uwah!! Ughh, guu…!?"

"It's the Belgarian army!"

At the foot of the walls were several High Britannians waiting with pikes in hand.

All the Belgarians who jumped couldn't stand up.
"D-Don't… surrender! I surrender!"

"Get him!!"

Countless pikes stabbed at them.

Germain who was watching from afar cried:

"Your Highness! The troops on the walls are getting shot from inside the city! The enemy must have deployed a large number of troops on the steel production street!"

"That is so…"

Latreille turned and look at Regis.

—— What should we do?

He asked with his gaze.

Regis took out his pocket watch.

It was already dark. He focused and managed to see the time.

The time…

Was still too early.

However, they were taking significant losses. If it gets completely dark, even if they issue the orders to retreat, the soldiers who

crossed the rope bridges would probably be unable to withdraw.

Cold sweat broke out on Regis' back.

It wasn't too late to order the retreat now.

But that would render all these sacrifices meaningless.

"... Please, just a bit more."

"Damn it… How many more minutes!? The infantry is getting wiped out!?"

Germain yelled hysterically.

In reality, there was a limit to the number of people who could cross the rope bridge. They wouldn't be wiped out, but if they sound the retreat too late, several thousand men would lose their lives.

Regis stared at his pocket watch.

And sighed.

His knees were trembling.

Was the watch malfunctioning? The time passed so slow that such a thought occurred to him.

Hurry.

He raised his head suddenly, and found himself alone, surrounded by corpses—— Regis saw this illusion for an instant.

The hands of the pocket watch finally reached the predetermined time.

Regis yelled:

"Retreat!"

"Retreat!!"

Latreille wasted no time in his orders, and Germain yelled at the top of his lungs.

—— Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!

The soldiers ran down the shrouds from the walls. Those who fell into the river were beyond saving as they were wearing armour.

A victorious roar erupted from Grebauvar City.

The Imperial First Army dragged their feet as they put some distance between them and the fort.

Germain mumbled:

"... We lost this battle."

In the darkness, the groans of the wounded sounded like a curse.

On the table in the middle of the tent was a large oil lamp.

Latreille and his staff were gathered around the light.

Everyone looked tired and anxious.

One knight said with a sigh.

"This is just an estimate… I think we lost about 2000 men. In exchange, we took out 30 enemy cannons."

The enemy had more than a 100 cannons.

It wasn't clear how many cannons they brought here, but this was very poor results.

"... The battle plan… failed."

Another knight said with a groan.

A dozen of the staff stared at the end of the table.

Regis was standing right at the very back, a step behind the group around the table.

His back started shivering.

“… I am sorry.”
That was all he could say.

A knight shouted loudly:

“You think apologizing is enough!? Isn’t the enemy supposed to be deployed at the fortress side!?”

Regis couldn’t say anything.

An elderly knight admonished him:

“Cool your head. You are in the presence of His Highness.”

Which meant to say, if Latreille wasn’t here, the elderly knight would have something to say too.

That was natural.

They lost a lot of their subordinates.

After the staff quieted down, Latreille asked:

“Sir Regis, do you have anything to say about our undeniable losses?”

“W-Well… Having less losses would be better…”

“Hmm. My approach isn’t right. Are the losses outside of your expectations?”

Regis turned pale.

This question was hard to answer.

But he couldn’t lie.

“… It is within my expectation.”

What!? A knight yelled and stood up, but the people around him grabbed him by the shoulders and sit him down.

He was on the verge of drawing his sword from anger.

Germain coughed twice.

“I can understand your bloodlust from losing your men. But what we need to do now is to make sure that their sacrifices are not in vain, and win this war. I hope you can calm down and participate in this conference.”

The young knight took a deep breath.

“Hmmp! I get it! But I can’t pretend I didn’t hear that! That guy said he expected losses. Which means to say he already predicted that the riflemen would be deployed at the steel production street right?”

Regis was showered by the gaze of the staff officers once again.

He couldn’t answer.

He didn’t want to find excuses, but saying ‘I predicted it’ would agitate the other party. What Regis wanted was a rational discussion.

Latreille shrugged.

“I don’t think Regis would propose a plan even after predicting that the lives of the soldiers would be lost meaninglessly… But such a misunderstanding might arise without a proper explanation. As the commander, I would like to dispel the sense of mistrust among my staff officers.”

His opinion was appropriate.

Regis should share his thoughts.

However, Regis felt uneasy. He was unconfident like usual, and found it hard to even articulate his words.

If he laid his thoughts bare, would it just earn more ire from others? What if they couldn’t understand despite his explanation?

When he was the strategist for Altina, the people around him seldom ask for explanations.

Even if he ordered the cannons to fire at the fortress despite being out of range, the artillery commander did not dispute his orders. Like the time he asked for oil to be spilled near the Imperial Capital, and

when he made the unit spent the entire night spilling water from the lake…

Altina, Jerome and the commanders of the units all carried out Regis' plan faithfully.

—— No, if he explained, they would definitely understand.

Maybe it was troublesome to listen to the details.

Maybe Regis had yet to earn the trust of the Imperial First Army, so he was requested to explain himself, it was just that simple.

He took a deep breath.

The ones gathered here were the very elites of the Imperial Army.

If it was Regis from a year ago, he would probably not be given the chance to speak. He became nervous thinking about that, but since that was the case, they will definitely understand if he explained —— He said to himself.

"… My prediction… is that the enemy would deploy their main forces on the fortress side. I guessed right, since that is only natural. The problem is… How large a force did they deploy at the steel production street. And how they are positioned. If the enemy are on the walls, we will be able to grasp their numbers. But they weren't there, the riflemen were formed up behind that. As if the enemy knew our plans."

Latreille's expression turned gloomy.

Germaine tilted his head.

"… Sir Regis, are you suspecting that we have a spy among us?"

Tch, the staff officers looked at each other.

A middle aged knight yelled this time.

"Are you questioning our loyalty!?"

Regis took a step backwards and shook his head.

“No no… Not at all. Setting the steel production street as the objective was done this morning. Even though I thought about making that place the top priority after hearing that the citizens are held there… But I proposed this and the orders were only issued this morning.”

They all remembered the war conference.

Latreille remained silent.

Germain nodded as if he was representing the staff officers.

“It is as Sir Regis said. We set off right after the plans were laid out.”

“Yes. We started preparing the troops and the entire army set off right after the war conference… In such a short time, it should be impossible to relay the information to the enemy that sealed themselves off in the fortress. Also, a letter would be needed to convey the details about us using a modified catapult. There is no other way other than sending a messenger to make a trip.”

“If such a person appeared on that battlefield, he would be very prominent.”

“Impossible. Worrying about impossible things is just retarded. We should focus on clear and present dangers… for example, something more horrifying than this.”

“More horrifying?”

“... Our schemes being seen through, that’s what I think. It is probably the de facto commander Oswald Coulthard who saw it. He probably predicted that I would propose the strategy of using siege weapon to build a shrouds bridge.”
“So the reason the plan failed is because Sir Regis was seen through by the enemy—— Is that it?”

Are you going to take responsibility for the plan’s failure, he was asking Regis.

It would turn out like this.

Regis didn't have the ambition to make it big or a big ego, but he was afraid of punishment. This probably won't be settled just by being exiled.

But he had to accept the facts.

"... There is no doubt that the plan failed because the enemy saw through our strategy… The High Britannians thought of a tactic that perfectly countered my strategy. Normally, the defenders would line up along the walls and shoot at the ground. However, the riflemen were positioned behind the wall, in great numbers."

There was no way to refute it.

The strategic intent of the Imperials and the results were clear to all.

Latreille changed the topic.

"There are no doubts about the current situation. Sir Regis mentioned you expected such losses right? Did you predict your strategy would be seen through?"

"... I think there is a possibility of that. The enemy would know we have prepared catapults by scouting us.

"We hid the shrouds carefully…"

"They might have guessed by thinking from our perspective."

Regis' strategy was just things written in widespread books. Not something new. Since the enemy commander was knowledgeable, he might be able to notice.

"Hmm… Seems like our adversary is really strong."

Unexpectedly, no one was blaming Regis.

Anxiety and uneasiness were spreading among the staff officers.

Germain groaned.

"... Just who is this Oswald character?"
Speaking of which, the First Army also suffered heavy losses at Fort Bonaire because they fell for his trick.

Fear of the enemy surged up again. Instead of the new model rifles and cannons, their cleverness was the thing that were frightening —— That's how the atmosphere changed.

The young knight rapped the table angrily.

"We! Aren't we the strongest Belgarian Imperial Army!? Why can't we win!? Failing at defending the fortress, now we failed to attack a fortress! Not just rifles, are we losing in wits too!?"

"Get a hold of yourself, you are in the presence of His Highness."

"Ughh… That's why! Don't you feel pitiful!"

"Uuu, that's true…"

The middle aged knight admonishing him couldn't say anything.

The other knights also asked:

"Sir Strategist! Can you think of a plan!? Or are there no other way!?"

"Well… That's all the strategy I can use…"

He took out a pocket watch from his uniform.

—— It should be about time.

"Report! A report!"

A soldier outside the tent shouted.

Regis who was at the end of the table looked at Latreille. Latreille didn't react, but Germain answered "Enter".

The messenger pulled open the drape at the entrance of the tent and entered.

Kneeling on one knee, he proffered a wooden sword.

"This!"

Regis who was at the end of the table took it.

“Where is this from?”

“As instructed by the strategist, the pioneers opened a net downstream of the river, and got fished this out!”

“Is that so… That’s great…”

The staff officers around him all looked at the item in Regis’ hand.

“Just a wooden sword?”

The young knight asked baffedly.

At a glance, it was just a simple wooden sword.

Regis pointed at the word carved on the hilt of the sword.

‘Succès’

Having accomplished the objective—— It has such a meaning.

It’s a wooden sword, so as a toy given to a boy by his parents, auspicious words would be carved on it, which was an acceptable explanation.

“Even if this thing is floating in the river, no one would treat this as a mean of relaying information right?”
“Hmm? Is this some sort of message?”

“Yes. The officer I despatched to the steel production street will throw this into the river if his infiltration is a success.”

Germain added.

“Everyone should know him… He is a soldier who excels even in the First Army, and was knighted as a Chevalier, Third Grade Combat Officer Jean Ulysse de Vallis.”

“Ohh, that guy!”

The young knight nodded.

When asking for suitable candidates, aside from the staff officers, the one with the best results in sprinting, swordsmanship and academics was Vallis.

He was a bright youth of just 17.

The middle aged knight rubbed his chin.

“Ku, which is to say… That Vallis infiltrated into a part of the steel production street?”

Regis nodded.

“This was a plan I prepared in case the shrouds bridge fail.”

“This is… shocking. When did he sneak in…?”

“When the attention of the enemy was all focused on the Imperial soldiers attempting to scale the walls. The best outcome would be the shrouds strategy to work and the gate is secured. However, considering the possibility of failure, I despatched a soldier to sneak in beforehand. As the wind here is strong, I thought about passing the message from the sky… But it is too prominent, and there is a chance the plan would be leaked to the enemy…”

There were other plans, such as meddling with the cannons, using birds, utilizing musical instruments—— There were numerous ways in the world of stories on methods to relay information to your allies.

However, there was nothing more reliable than delivering it in person. And the plan succeeded, so Regis was relieved.

The expression on the young knight’s face softened.

“Then the battle today wasn’t meaningless… We couldn’t seize the gates… But we still carried out a good feint attack. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“Fuu… Is that so… Our dead comrades can rest in peace. But Sir Strategist and Sir Germain are too nasty. If you are going to execute such a plan, you should just tell us.”

Germain lowered his head.

“My apologies. Using this plan would mean the shrouds bridge strategy would fail, that’s why…”

The young knight understood.

“Indeed! In a battle you are betting your life on, if we tell them that ‘we prepared another strategy in case this plan fails’, our men would wonder why they are risking their lives. Such half hearted attitude would result in them failing in a plan they will usually succeed at, and would not achieve the effect of a feint!”

“That is so.”

“... I’m glad that you can understand.”

Regis nodded too.

There was another reason he couldn’t say.

The infiltration plan might not work.

There was a possibility that the battle today was in vain.

And it wasn’t over yet. There was an even more difficult mission waiting for Third Grade Combat Officer Vallis who had infiltrated.

The middle aged knight asked:

“Grebauvar’s citizens’ weapons must have been confiscated, and they are probably locked in one of the zones. Can Vallis save them alone?”

“Of course, because the citizens can’t escape by their own power ____”

Regis explained the crucial points as he tried to hide the information.

For this plan, even if there were spies, he couldn’t allow the time for the spies to act.

However, he couldn’t rule out that there isn’t any spy.

It was prudent to be careful.

In order to not let the staff officers know that he was wary about them, it was important to choose his words wisely.

Final Chapter: Vallis

The Belgarian Imperial Army modified a catapult and made a bridge out of shrouds.

With the sun setting behind the mountain, the surroundings were dark.

Even though the soldiers of the First Army couldn't see your feet, they still ran up the shrouds swiftly, and finally scaled to the top of the wall.

The riflemen of High Britannia received the orders to fire.

Countless gunshot echoed out.

The Belgarians standing at the top of the walls fell one after another. Blood splattered and even for those who leapt off the walls, the fate of being turned into a pincushion by pikemen awaited them.

They were completely suppressed by the enemy.

But this was the first time the High Britannians were experiencing this.

Belgarian soldiers were the strongest in the continent.

They possessed the newest model of rifle and could several more times the damage to the enemy. They had already killed thousands on their long journey here.

But if the Belgarians scale over the wall and open the gates, the Belgarian cavalry would poured in.

There were less than 5000 men deployed in the steel production street.

While the Imperial First Army had 3000 cavalry. There was no way they could win.

During the battle of Lafressange, they failed to stop the 500 cavalry that attacked from behind them, and cut right through their formation.

When they fought the cavalry at Fort Bonaire, their only engagement was a retreat. Even though it was a feint and the plan was to trick them into taking the barrels of gunpowder with people hidden inside,

they would need to retreat even if that wasn't the strategy.

Cavalries were strong.

And the horses of the Belgarian cavalry were especially large and well trained, known to be the strongest on the continent. And in the Empire, the First Army were the most elite.

High Britannia's riflemen fired with all they had got in order to survive, killing the Imperial soldiers that scaled the walls one after the other.

Grebauvar city had countless intertwining waterways.

As steel production requires large amount of flowing water, there were more waterways here than the fortress and city center.

The structure included holes at the lower parts of the walls to allow the river water to flow in.

There wasn't any steel grate to stop people from entering.

Because the steel in this era would rust quickly when soaked in water.

And things like sand, splinters, or dead fish would easily clog the grates.

That was why men on sentry would be stationed at the waterway holes, who would keep a close watch for anyone sneaking in by swimming through the holes.

However, the soldiers didn't watch the waterway when Belgarian soldiers appeared on the city walls.

With the enemy that were after their lives appearing in their field of vision, there was no way they would stare at the place that doesn't change every day.

If the Imperial soldiers scaled up the walls with the shrouds, the sentries wouldn't be able to spare the effort to watch the drains. And Regis' plan was to aim for such a moment to let the infiltrator sneak in.

Under the thin veil of darkness, in the drainage——

It was impressive for normal human to hold their breath for a minute and swim, but Jean Ulysse de Vallis could dive underwater for almost 10 minutes.

He used a heavy object to dive, and discarded it when he wanted to surface. His clothes were covered in oil so it wouldn't absorb much water, so his body movement wasn't too restricted.

He leapt into the river, swam to the castle wall, then dived through the hole, and swam into the city.

In the middle of the drain, Vallis' head surfaced for an instant

"… Huff!"

But he still made breathing sound.

He took a breath and checked his surroundings for an instant, then dived again.

After analyzing what he saw in that moment, he was sure there wasn't any enemy soldier in the surrounding.

He threw away the weights and flippers that allow him to move underwater.
Vallis surfaced again.

There were steps everywhere around the drain. They were used for the women to wash laundry and collect water for daily necessities.

Walking up those steps, Vallis climbed from the stone made drain onto the ground.

There was still constant gunfire coming from the east. Thanks to that, he didn't have to worry about the noise of large amount of water dripping down from his uniform.

As it was a sneaking mission, so he was wearing a High Britannia uniform. He still couldn't speak in perfect High Britannian accent, he was good enough to masquerade as someone from the rural areas.

He grabbed his short hair and shook off the water in them.

“… Infiltration completed.”

He muttered softly.

Vallis took out a wooden sword from his clothes and placed it onto the water. The word ‘success’ was carved on it.
This wasn’t the river, but the water was still flowing fast. It glided forth and was gone in no time.

There were many forks in the water, but the drainage was situated to the north of the steel production street, which flowed out into the river outside.

The drainage downstream also had the function of expelling sewage. It was constructed in a way that could push water and other things out of the city.

If it doesn’t get stuck by something in the river due to bad luck, the sword should be able to flow downstream.

Gunshots continued ringing out.

He could hear anguish cries and screams.

The High Britannians were repelling the Belgarian’s attack.

As there wasn’t any water proof watch, he didn’t know the time. But since the battle was still going on, he had completed the mission within the allocated time.

Or maybe the Belgarian Army had secured the gates, and his mission was now unnecessary?

No matter what, Vallis’ mission remained the same.

Until the citizens of Grebauvar was rescued——

He recalled the map of the area and confirmed his location.

First of all, he needed to check the possible places where the citizens might be held. According to intel, it should be somewhere to the north…

He walked along the path while keeping an eye on his surroundings.

The city was dark, not a single light was lit as if he was walking along the mountain path. He could only rely on the moonlight.

Even though most of the buildings here belonged to civilians, but no one seemed to be staying here.

The gunshots stopped.

But there wasn't any sound of the gate opening.

Which meant the Belgarian army retreated without seizing the gate. The battle over there failed.

The burden on Vallis' shoulders became heavier.

If he wasn't careful and act swiftly…

After the sound of gunfire subsided, he could hear footsteps approaching immediately.

"Hmm!?"

It stepped right before the bend.

A figure then appeared from the shadows of the building.

It was a woman!

With a bandana on her head, she was dressed like a girl working in the city. A sash was tied around the waist of her dress, and she wore a laced apron over it.

She was petite.

When he saw Vallis, her eyes and mouth opened wide from surprise.

Vallis pushed hard off the ground.

He covered her mouth with his left hand, and grabbed her throat with her right.

If she was an enemy soldier, Vallis would have broke her neck——
But this girl was probably the citizens he should be rescuing.

He pushed her onto the wall of the building.

“If you make any noise, I will kill you.”

“Mmm!?”

“If you resist, I will kill you too. Same if you don’t answer me. Listen carefully to my question and answer.”

“Mmm…”

The eyes of the girl were filled with fear.
Her woven baskets fell to the ground. Baguettes, pears and wine bottles rolled out of it.

—— Just a peddler huh.

It was common to see the citizens trading with the enemy soldiers that occupied the city. Even in the territories occupied by Belgaria, there were many merchants from the former enemy state that make a living by selling goods to Imperial soldiers.

However, Vallis didn’t expect that there weren’t any pillaging.

The High Britannians were unexpectedly disciplined.

It’s probably because the liberation of the citizens could be used as a negotiation chip.

Vallis asked:

“Are you a Belgarian?”

“Yes.”

“I am Third Grade Combat Officer Jean Ulysse de Vallis from the Imperial First Army, I am here to save you all. Do you understand?”

“…Hmm!?”

He felt that her eyes remain doubtful, but she still answered “Oui”.

“You might be a citizen, but I will kill you if you shout. Understand?”

“Yes.”

Vallis released her hand.

But he pressed his hand on the short sword on his waist. If she made any noise, he would have to kill her.

Unlike the toy wooden sword he threw down the drain, this was a real short sword. It was sharp enough to spill blood with just a touch.

As he needed to dive under the weapon, it was the only weapon he could bring.

Vallis stared at her small head.

She was as delicate as a doll. If he swings his sword, it won't just cut her throat, it would chop her entire head off.

Fortunately, the girl was smart. Even though she groaned earlier, she didn't scream.

Vallis questioned her.

"Tell me. Where are the citizens held?"
"... Everyone is in the northern zone. We are all living in someone else's house."

Just like the intel said.

Even though there were escapees, the holding place remained the same.

"Sentries?"

"... There are some at the border of the zones."

"I need accurate information."

"On my way here, I saw four men. They were holding rifles."

Four men huh.

Even if he defeated them by surprise, there would be a commotion if one shot goes off. If possible, he wanted to avoid battle.

"I want to meet the representative of the citizen. Is that possible?"

"Representative? The mayor? I think he is dead… So the big shot of the steel production guild would be the representative? Hmm…"

He now knew who the representatives of the citizens was, but wasn't sure how to meet him.

"How did you leave the place where you are held?"

"To peddle. Although the merchandize are our items and clothes, there is no other way if we want to survive."

She brushed her blonde hair and tidied her messy clothes.

Her body that looked as frail as a child and she seemed unsuitable for manual labour.

If her belongings were snatched, she wouldn’t be able to sell

anything. She would probably need to earn money by working as a maid—— Vallis concluded.

However, this wasn't the situation to question about her workplace.

He had to breakthrough the surveillance of the sentries and meet with the representatives of the citizens.

He considered asking the girl to pass the message…

But that was too dangerous.

He wasn't sure if she was trustworthy.

She might sell Vallis out to the High Britannians for the sake of self interest.
There really were citizens who feared the enemy and sell out the allies who came to save them.

"Over there! What's happening!?"

He could hear voices speaking High Britannian coming from afar.

Vallis' back stiffened.

He turned back, and saw a soldier running on the road.

Was he alone?

As he was talking here, and the enemy was some distance away and small in numbers, that's why he didn't notice their footsteps…

It won't be a problem if there was just one man.

He could ambush and kill him, then hide the body in the building here.

However, there were about 10 High Britannian soldiers behind him.

Vallis clicked his tongue in his heart.

—— Should I run?

But that would alert them. It would be hard to contact the citizens, and the chance of the plan working would drop drastically.

—— Should I kill them?

With 10 gun-toting enemies, it would be hard to win even if they don't shoot.

"Ughh…"

"… Leave it to me."

The girl before him said softly.

She took off her bandana, and let her blonde hair sway in the wind. She looked at the enemy with her green eyes.

"Ahh, Mr soldier, this person here don't look well."

She wiped Vallis' face and hair with her bandana as she said that. Because she was shorter, she had to tiptoe to do that.

The High Britannian leader walking in front tilted his head.

"He don't look well…?"

His accent was strong, but he could still speak Belgarian.

The soldiers around him didn't understand what that meant, and looked at the duo suspiciously.

The girl shrugged.

"He seemed really disturbed after hearing gunshots. He then walked unsteadily and fell into the drainage there. Look, he is all wet."

"Is he drunk!?"

"I think he drank a little? Even though he was escorting me, but he was not feeling well in the first place. Ah… Could it be, he is ill?"

"Wha…!?"

The leader took one step back.

He then unknowingly said 'is it a disease?' in High Britannian, making the other soldiers back off fearfully.

The army had congregated in this dense and cramp place. And there were those drinking muddy water and eating rotting food. They seldom change clothes and the beds they slept in weren't hygienic.

High Britannia had been on a campaign for more than a month, and lots of people had fallen ill from the physical and mental grind.

Among them were people who got infected with contagious diseases.

It was dangerous and they didn't want to go near. If they fall sick in this land, they would probably lose their lives here.

Vallis also acted along with the girl.

Cough cough, he coughed.

"Oh, are you alright?"

"You there, which unit are you from!?"

"Ah… I am from… Hack! Cough! Cough!"

Vallis started coughing mid sentence.

He knew how to state what unit he belonged to via the interrogations of the High Britannians captured in the battle of Fort Bonaire.

However, he might be exposed as someone who didn't belong if he was brought back to that unit.

And if he stated a random unit, there was a chance that the unit wasn't deployed in this the steel production street. As most of the troops were assigned to the fortress, the chance of getting it wrong was higher. In the end, his lie would be exposed.

If possible, he didn't want to state a unit.

The girl patted his back.

"Wait! You just vomited, don't push yourself!"

"He puked…?"

The leader looked disgusted.

“Really? Just now?”

“Hey! Galian girl! Take him to the medics! We are busy with patrols. You know where it is?”
The leader pushed the sick person onto the girl.

Their acting was a success!
However, she made a show of being confused and unhappy.

“What is this? I told you I am going home right? Since he is a soldier, shouldn’t another soldier bring him?”
“Uhh…”

“I’m starting to feel hot, I want to go home soon.”

What amazing acting skills.
The soldiers showed faces of ‘I want to get out of here right now, and not deal with this’.

The leader made a gesture to shoo her away.

“You take that guy to the medics! He will bear the charges. Understand!?”

“Yes… Well, it would be great if he can shoulder the burden for some soft fruits. My sick mother is still waiting for me back home.”

“Do what you want!”

The leader was probably annoyed by all these talk about sick patients and bellowed, then issued orders to his men.

They then headed downstream.

Maybe the sentries discovered him surfacing for air when Vallis was swimming earlier.

No, if they really saw him, they would be more thorough with their search.

The feint attack of the strategist Regis d’Auric worked.

There were no problems.

To be safe, he continued acting until the High Britannian soldiers couldn't see them.

"Cough, cough… Pardon me, little miss… Cough, cough!"

"Ara ara, are you alright?"

She supported him with her shoulder, and left that place.

They then went to a house with an open door, and hid themselves.

"Phew… we are saved."

"Ahaha, fooling the arrogant soldiers feels really good."

As they were hiding, the two of them kept their voices down.

However, her expression brightened. Maybe it's because the house was a bit dark, but her smile looked really childish.

This was the house of a certain worker in the steel production street. It had the faint smell of steel. It didn't look like a wealthy family, but it had steel tables and chairs.

The two of them sat on the chairs.

Vallis wanted a warm cup of coffee… But lighting a fire or light would be very conspicuous, so he couldn't do that.

The room was dark, only the moonlight shone through the windows.

Vallis thanked her properly once again.

"Thank you very much. I promise that I will definitely save you and your mother."

"Erm… My mother… is dead. When we were chased out of the house, she was kicked by the soldier, and that simply…"

"What!?"

"Because I have a heavily ill mother, I couldn't marry or work in a place with a form. I kept working to save money for medicine, and was almost at my limit…"

“... Is that so.”

“Even so… My mother is…”

Her blonde locks covered her eyes.

Her petite shoulders were trembling.

Vallis didn’t have a family. He became a war orphan when he was still young, and was picked up by the church. He learned swordsmanship and horsemanship from the priests and joined the army.

There were many orphans raised by the church, so they were his siblings in a way. He felt that the priest was his actual father. But he didn’t really understand what a mother was.
So he couldn’t find the words to answer the girl.

“...Is that so.”

Vallis repeated the same words.

She raised her head.

“If I let you meet a big shot among the citizens, we will be saved?”

“Yes. I received my orders directly from the Field Marshal of the Imperial Army, Prince Allen Deux Latreille de Belgaria. His Adjutant Lord Germain was there too. And I heard the one who formulated this plan, was the Strategist Sir Regis d’Auric who defeated the High Britannians several times. There is no plan that is more correct than this.”

“Is that so… I don’t really understand, but I might have heard some of those names before.”

“He is the great man who will be the next Emperor.”

“Ahaha, for a commoner like me, it doesn’t matter who becomes Emperor, right?”

“I see.”

“Neh, after saving the citizens… After you save us…”

“What?”

“…You will fight the enemy? And kill those bastards?”

“Of course.”

Vallis nodded seriously.
The girl wiped her tears with the tip of her fingers and then stood up.

“I get it, I will help you! I will bring you to the big shot of the steel production guild. Because everyone listens to what he says.”

“Ah, it will be great if that person hold such a position. But there are sentries right? What is your plan?”

“Ermmm… Well, I will do something about them.”

“I understand, so… erm…”

He finally noticed that he didn’t ask for her name.

There wasn’t any need to ask for the name of the citizens he came across in the city, but a helper was different.

The girl smiled awkwardly.

“My name is Felicia okay? It’s funny right!? My mother named me after a royal. Even though I’m just a commoner in the boondocks. It would be Lèse-majesté if people call me by my name, so everyone call me Fel.”

Vallis nodded —— then he realized.

He stared at the girl before him. The 5th princess Felicia Six Celia de Belgaria was just 14 years old, and not of age.

If she was named after her, she should be younger than the princess.

“Y-You are… just a kid!?”

“Ahaha! Your face looks so strange!”

Fel laughed like a child.

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最弱の皇妃アルティナ IX
読んで(だよっ)ありがとうございます!!
意外と描いてない気がしたので、
エリーゼちゃんを描いてみました。
むらさきさん、担当の和田さん、
今回も校条ませていただきました。
ありがとうございます。